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Human-Animal Relationships

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

The overwhelming majority of philosophical discussions about the relationships between humans and animals concern the *human use and treatment of animals* in contexts such as those of food production, scientific experimentation, and pet-keeping. By contrast, the *kinds of affective bonds* that do – or might conceivably – occur between humans and animals, have received very little philosophical attention. In this dissertation, my main, but not exclusive, concern is with the latter issue. More specifically, I am primarily concerned with the question of whether human-animal relationships can be *meaningful*. Because pet animals are the clearest candidates for meaningful relationships with us, they will be the focus of my discussion. I argue that at least some human-pet relationships can be meaningful, even if they are not among the most meaningful relationships in our lives. Thereafter, I shall turn to one question about the *treatment and use* of animals on which the earlier question bears, namely the question of whether the practice of having pets is permissible.

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Introduction

Humans have long lived their lives in close proximity to animals. Even the earliest of humans are presumed to have structured their lives around hunting and consuming animals, while at the same time trying to avoid being hunted and consumed by animals. What is more, archaeological evidence suggests that humans began using (certain kinds of) animals as hunting companions, beasts of burden, and modes of transportation, as many as twelve thousand years ago, and that (small-scale) animal husbandry became common practice relatively soon after that.¹

The emergence of animal husbandry, or, conversely, the shift away from traditional hunting and gathering, is (likely) significant for a number of reasons and in a variety of contexts. In the present context, however, its significance lies in the fact that it marked an important change in the relationship between humans and animals. More specifically, it marked an important change in the way that humans *viewed* animals. Indeed, while ancient rock art depicts a relationship of equality between traditional hunter-gatherers and (many prey) animals, early farmers are presumed to have considered animals to be largely under their control, and subject to their will.²

But, while their viewing animals in this way likely resulted in their treating some kinds of animals cruelly, the early farmers were not cruel towards all animals. On the contrary, they were some of the first humans to exhibit (deep) emotional attachments to certain kinds of animals.³ We know this largely because of the discovery of ancient animal burials. But how could this be so, some might wonder? Burying the deceased is, after all, just one of the more hygienic ways of disposing of dead bodies. There are, however, a number of *ways* in which the dead can be buried, and although the mere act of burying might have no deep significance, the varying ways in which the dead are buried, usually do. The great care with

¹ Serpell, *In the Company of Animals*, 1996, pp. 4-5; DeLoache, Pickard & LoBue, "How Very Young Children Think about Animals" in *How Animals Affect Us*, 2011, p. 85.

² Serpell, 1996:5.

³ Serpell, 1996:4; Morey, "Burying Key Evidence: The Social Bond between Dogs and People" in *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 2006, p. 167.

which the early farmers – as well as their descendants – buried certain kinds of animals, certainly signifies a great deal more than a concern for hygienic disposal of the dead.⁴

To see this, consider, for example, that in the Upper Jordan Valley there is a tomb – dated about 12 000 BP – containing the skeleton of an elderly human male, lying curled in a fetal position with his left arm wrapped carefully around the chest of the skeleton of a puppy.⁵ Since a human's lying with his arm(s) wrapped around the chest of another is almost always a gesture of affection, the elderly human and the puppy's having been buried in this position, does suggest that people at that time had emotional attachments to dogs.⁶ More specifically, it suggests either that the elderly human had had affection for the puppy, or that those who buried the elderly human placed some importance on emotional attachments to animals.⁷

The Koster site in the state of Illinois in the United States of America is also suggestive of ancient humans' emotional attachment to dogs. Although no joint human-dog burial was found there, the site contains the 8500 year-old skeletal remains of three dogs, each of which had been buried in much the same way that (human) family members and friends would have been buried at the time.⁸ That is, each of the deceased dogs had been placed very carefully on its right side, in its own grave.

Dogs are not the only animals that were buried with such care, however. It was by no means uncommon for deceased cats and some kinds of birds to be embalmed, placed in sarcophagi, and then entombed with their respective humans in Ancient Egypt, for example.⁹

⁴ Morey, 2006:164.

⁵ Clutton-Brock, "Origins of the Dog: Domestication and Early History" in Serpell (Ed.), *The Domestic Dog*, 1995, p. 10; Wang & Telford, "Domestic Dogs" in *Dogs: Their Fossil Relatives and Evolutionary History*, 2010, pp. 155-156.

⁶ Wang & Telford, 2010:156; Morey, "The Burial of Dogs, and What Dog Burials Mean" in *Dogs: Domestication and the Development of a Social Bond*, 2010, p. 152-153.

⁷ Since it is very unlikely that the puppy died at the just same time as the elderly human, it may well have been killed in order to be buried with the human. Thus, contrary to my interpretation, some might think that the burial signifies nothing more than an utter lack of respect for the puppy's life. As Morey (2006:164) points out, however, (many) ancient humans are presumed to have believed in some or other kind of after-life or spirit world. With this in mind, if the puppy was in fact killed in order to be buried with the elderly human, then this would likely have been to ensure that the two entered the (perceived) spirit world together, and were thus able to continue their relationship

⁸ Morey, 2006:159.

⁹ DeLoache, Pickard & LoBue, 2001:86; Spencer *et al*, "History and Ethics of Keeping Pets: Comparison with Farm Animals" in *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 2006, p. 17.

While these are, perhaps, the most well-known of the ancient animal burials that have been found, they are by no means the only such burials to point unmistakably towards ancient humans' (deep) emotional attachments to certain kinds of animals. Similar ancient animal burials have in fact been found on *every* major land mass in the world, with the exception of Antarctica,¹⁰ a continent that, owing to its very hostile environment, remained almost entirely desolate of humans until the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹ Even today, no humans permanently reside there.

Contemporary humans, too, treat certain kinds of deceased animals with great care. In many parts of the world, the bodies or cremated remains of pet dogs and cats, for example, are routinely (ceremonially) buried at their respective humans' private residences. In some of the wealthier parts of the world, however, these deceased animals may even be accorded the same kinds of elaborate treatment that deceased (human) family members and friends receive. In the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and some parts of Europe and Korea, for example, it is not all that uncommon for deceased dogs and cats to be taken to a dedicated animal funeral home.¹² There, they are placed in small wooden coffins before being taken to special animal cemeteries or crematoria.¹³

But, of course, this is just *some* of the evidence of contemporary human's (continued) emotional attachment to certain kinds of animals. Plenty of additional evidence can be found outside of the burial context. Consider, for example, that despite the fact that animals are frequently dirty, smelly, noisy, and costly (both financially and in terms of freedom and convenience) a great many humans allow certain of them the run of their houses. Some humans even go so far as to treat certain animals as honorary family members: they give them human names, allow them to share their beds and, if need be, to *drain* their financial resources.

With all of this in mind, it is unsurprising that the relationships between humans and animals are, and have been, a subject of discussion in various disciplines. In moral philosophy, there has been a growing literature over the last few decades. What is surprising, however, is that the overwhelming majority of philosophical discussions about these relationships, concern

¹⁰ Morey, 2006:151.

¹¹ <http://www.antarcticaonline.com/history/history.htm>

¹² Morey, 2006:161.

¹³ Ibid.

the *human use and treatment of animals* in contexts such as those of food production, scientific experimentation, and pet-keeping. By contrast, the *kinds of affective bonds* that do – or might conceivably – occur between humans and animals, have received very little philosophical attention.¹⁴

In this dissertation, I shall concern myself mainly, but not exclusively, with this latter issue. More specifically, I shall concern myself mainly, but not exclusively, with the question of whether human-animal bonds (or relationships) can be *meaningful*. In doing so, however, I certainly do not mean to imply that too much philosophical attention has been directed towards the human use and treatment of animals, or that the importance of these matters has been exaggerated in some way. Anyone who knows anything at all about factory farming and vivisection, for example, will know that despite the philosophical attention these practices have received – and the resultant implementation of various animal welfare laws and industry standards – animals continue to be treated very badly in these contexts.

With so little having been written about the possibility of meaningful human-animal relationships, there is, of course, opportunity here for saying something that philosophers have not yet said. However, to do so, one must grapple with difficult issues without the benefit of being able to engage with a body of literature on the topic. Indeed, in well-worn philosophical fields, the novice can read and then build on the ideas and arguments of other, more established thinkers. Working in uncharted territory is, thus, in some ways, a much more challenging task.

Before commencing this task, however, two clarifications about terminology need to be made. The first concerns my use of the word ‘animal’. Although many people (seem to) have great difficulty accepting this simple truth, humans – like lions, wart frogs and brown spider monkeys – are a species of animal. Thus, rather than referring to ‘human-animal relationship(s)’ and ‘animal(s)’, I ought really to refer to ‘human-(non-human) animal relationship(s)’ and ‘non-human animal(s)’, respectively. But, to do this would render my

¹⁴ Townley’s “Animals as Friends” in *Between the Species*; Jordan’s “Why Friends Shouldn’t Let Friends be Eaten” in *Social Theory and Practice*; Schicktanz’s “Ethical Considerations of the Human-Animal Relationship under Conditions of Asymmetry and Ambivalence” in *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*; and Maziz’s “Our Embodied Friendships with Dogs” and Weiss’s “Do I Walk with My Dog?” in Steven Hale (Ed.), *What Philosophy Can Tell You about Your Dog*, are the few papers that I have found that make some attempt to explore this issue.

writing clumsy and, thus, difficult to follow in parts. For the sake of avoiding confusion, I shall therefore continue to use ‘human-animal relationship(s)’ as shorthand for ‘human-(non-human) animal relationship(s)’, and ‘animal(s)’ as shorthand for ‘non-human animal(s)’.

The second terminological clarification concerns the word ‘pet’. For many humans, their interaction with those animals traditionally called ‘pets’, fully accounts for the extent to which they interact with (live) animals at all. Thus, for most humans, the possibility of meaningful relationships with animals is best understood as the possibility of, what I hesitate to call, meaningful human-*pet* relationships.¹⁵ I hesitate here, as calling an animal a ‘pet’, has come to suggest ownership of the relevant animal. And, this idea of ownership may well foster inappropriate attitudes towards the animal called ‘pet’.

For this reason, I would do better to follow the likes of Keith Burgess-Jackson and Gary Varner,¹⁶ and refer to those animals traditionally called ‘pets’ as ‘companion animals’ or ‘domesticated partners’, for example. Given, however, that my referring to them in either of these ways might be thought to *imply* the possibility of our having meaningful relationships with them – and, thus, to beg the question under consideration – I shall, throughout this thesis, (continue to) refer to this group of animals as ‘pets’.

Because pets are the clearest candidates for meaningful relationships with us, they will be the focus of my discussion in this dissertation. I shall focus on dogs as a paradigmatic example, but much of what I say could also be extended to other species of animals that have traditionally been kept as pets. However, in order to make the case for meaningful human-pet relationships, I shall sometimes (need to) turn my attention towards other kinds of animals, namely those that are not usually kept as pets.

WHAT IS A MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIP?

Most of us believe that relationships *can* be meaningful. Most of us also believe that at least some relationships *are* meaningful. In fact, most of us believe that at least some of the

¹⁵ Indeed, if some individual’s interactions with (live) animals are restricted to his interaction with his ‘pet’, then if meaningful human-animal relationships are in fact possible, it is only with his ‘pet’ that he could have such a relationship.

¹⁶ See Burgess-Jackson, “Doing Right by Our Companion Animals”, and Varner, “Pets, Companion Animals, and Domesticated Partners”, in David Benatar (Ed.), *Ethics for Everyday*, 2002, pp. 427-449 & 450-475, respectively.

relationships to which *we are party*, are meaningful. And, given the amount of time and energy that we willingly devote to establishing new, and maintaining old(er) relationships that we take to be meaningful, it is clear that we also believe that involvement in meaningful relationships is a very good thing. Throughout what follows, I shall assume the truth of each of these beliefs.

In light of the (perceived) existence and importance of meaningful relationships in our lives, it is quite remarkable that we find the very basic question, “what is a meaningful relationship?”, so difficult even to begin to answer. What is more remarkable, however, is that the philosophical literature offers very little guidance in this regard: although philosophers have spoken a great deal about specific kinds of meaningful relationships – and, in particular, about friendships and romantic relationships – they have said very little about what makes some kinds of relationships kinds of meaningful relationships.

In the absence of prior work on this question, a good starting point is to consider some examples of relationships that are thought to be meaningful, and to ask oneself what it is that might make them so. And, if we consider various friendships and romantic relationships, there seem to be two ways in which a relationship might be thought to be meaningful. The first is that it may *feel*, or being *experienced* as being meaningful, where this is just to say that it feels, or is experienced as being satisfying or important. I shall refer to relationships that feel, or are experienced in this way, as being meaningful in the *subjective* sense.

The second way in which a relationship might be thought to be meaningful, is that it has a certain depth to it. I shall say more about what gives relationships this sort of depth in the following two chapters. For now, the important point is that a relationship can plausibly be thought to lack the requisite depth, even if it is meaningful in the subjective sense. That is, although the parties to a relationship might experience it as being a meaningful one, the relationship might nonetheless lack the requisite depth. For this reason, I shall refer to relationships that have the requisite depth, as being meaningful in the *objective* sense.

At the risk of stating the obvious, it is worth clarifying that a relationship’s having the requisite depth, or being experienced as meaningful, is *not* sufficient for it to be meaningful in the objective, or subjective sense, respectively. To be meaningful in either of these senses, a relationship must, in addition to its having the requisite depth or being experienced as

meaningful, have a *positive* “valency”. That is to say, although a relationship might be sufficiently deep to be meaningful in the objective sense, it will in fact be meaningful in this sense only if it is an affirming relationship, and not a destructive one. Likewise, although the parties to a relationship might experience it as being meaningful, if they experience it as being so in virtue of the pain and suffering that it has caused them, then the relationship cannot properly be thought to be meaningful in the subjective sense.

Now, since meaningfulness is a matter of degree, it makes sense to think – as most of us do – that some relationships can be less or more meaningful than other relationships, or, put another way, that there is a *spectrum* of meaningful relationships. Both the subjective and the objective senses of meaningfulness are consistent with the idea of a spectrum of meaningful relationships. Indeed, if meaningfulness in relationships depends upon the relationships’ being experienced as meaningful, then because some relationships can be experienced as being less or more meaningful than other relationships, a spectrum of meaningful relationships is certainly possible, if not inevitable. And, if meaningfulness in relationships depends upon those relationships’ having a certain depth to them, then because some relationships can have less or more depth to them than other relationships, there can also be a spectrum of relationships that are meaningful in the objective sense.

Given, then, that the phrase “meaningful relationship” can properly be thought ambiguous between “a relationship meaningful in the subjective sense” and “a relationship meaningful in the objective sense”, one might well wonder which sense of meaningfulness really counts. Should one take the view that: a) the subjective sense is sufficient for a relationship to count as meaningful; b) the objective sense is sufficient for a relationship to count as meaningful; or c) both the subjective and the objective senses are necessary for a relationship to count as meaningful?

Rather than answering this question and then considering whether human-pet relationships can be meaningful on the relevant view, I shall argue that human-pet relationships can be meaningful in *both* the subjective *and* the objective senses of meaningfulness. The advantage of proceeding in this way is that if my later argument is correct, then human-pet relationships can be meaningful no matter which view of a meaningful relationship one takes. If my later argument is correct, it will also be the case that human-pet relationships can not only be barely meaningful, but also substantially meaningful, even if they are not among the most

meaningful of relationships in our lives. However, in saying this, I do not mean to imply that these relationships *cannot* be among the most meaningful of relationships in our lives. I shall pass no judgment on this matter.

OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

Although many people believe in the possibility of meaningful human-pet relationships, many others take this belief to be totally misguided. This fairly widespread scepticism about the possibility of such relationships is almost always rooted in one or more of the following objections: 1) to think meaningful human-pet relationships possible is just to be *sentimental*; 2) human-pet relationships are *asymmetrical*; and 3) to think meaningful human-pet relationships possible is to engage in *anthropomorphism*. Henceforth, I shall refer to these three broad objections as the sentimentalism objection, the asymmetry objection, and the anthropomorphism objection, respectively.

In Chapter 2, the chapter immediately following this introductory one, I develop and then evaluate the asymmetry objection, which, as I shall argue, is an objection to the idea that human-pet relationships be sufficiently deep and, thus, meaningful in the *objective* sense of meaningfulness. In that chapter, I discuss the various ways in which human-pet relationships might be thought asymmetrical, and whether any of these asymmetries render meaningful human-pet relationships impossible. In doing so, I consider whether various *inter-human* relationships' being asymmetrical in any of these ways, rules out the possibility of their being meaningful.

What I hope to show is that some of (what we take to be) the most meaningful of relationships in our lives are asymmetrical in the very same ways that human-pet relationships are asymmetrical. But, if various *inter-human* relationships can be *both* asymmetrical in these ways *and* among the most meaningful of relationships in our lives, then *human-pet* relationships' being asymmetrical in the relevant ways cannot reasonably be thought to preclude the possibility of their being meaningful.

The third chapter is devoted to developing and evaluating the anthropomorphism objection. This objection, like the asymmetry objection, can be construed as opposing the idea that human-pet relationships can be sufficiently deep, and thus meaningful in the objective sense.

Unlike the asymmetry objection, however, it can also be construed as an objection to the idea that these relationships can be meaningful in the *subjective* sense. Thus, following an explication of the term ‘anthropomorphism’, I consider each construal.

In both chapters 2 and 3, my arguments consist, to a very large extent, in the ‘method of reflective equilibrium’. That is, they consist, to a very large extent, in working back and forth among our intuitions about meaningful relationships in general, our intuitions about various meaningful inter-human relationships, our beliefs about pets and other animals’ capacities, and scientific studies of pets and other animals’ capacities. In working back and forth in this way, any inconsistencies that might exist among these various intuitions, beliefs and scientific conclusions, can be identified and removed. It is only once we have been through this process that we shall be able to pronounce more reliably on the possibility of meaningful human-pet relationships.

There is no chapter devoted to the first of the three objections to the idea of meaningful human-pet relationships, the sentimentalism objection. This is because the sentimentalism objection in fact reduces to the other two objections, as I shall argue in the final section of this introduction. Thus, in the fourth and final chapter, I shall turn my attention away from the question of whether meaningful human-pet relationships are possible, and consider whether it is morally permissible for us to have pets. More specifically, I consider whether it is morally permissible for those humans who are kind and caring towards their pets, to have pets.

Although it makes sense to assume that pets derive some benefit from being party to meaningful relationships with humans, this is not sufficient to show that it is permissible for us to have pets. On the contrary, we also need to consider whether pets are a) harmed as a result of their being pets and, if so, whether this harm outweighs the benefit that they derive; or b) wronged as a result of their being pets. My consideration of the permissibility of the practice of having pets shall thus consist in an exploration of these questions.

THE SENTIMENTALISM OBJECTION

For some person, idea, or action to be sentimental, that person, idea, or action must – even if not consciously – be motivated by, or grounded in, feelings. More specifically, that person,

idea or action must – even if not consciously – be motivated by, or grounded in, *soft* feelings, where soft feelings are those that many assume to be the more refined feelings, those such as compassion, pity, and joy.¹⁷

Thus, he who, on account of the comfort that it brings him, treasures the single surviving photograph of his long-deceased parent, can properly be described as being sentimental (with respect to the photograph). Likewise, he who takes his poodle to the parlour for a cut and blow-dry each month because he simply cannot bear the idea of his poodle having to walk around looking unkempt, can properly be described as being sentimental (on the relevant occasions).

But, although both individuals can properly be described as being sentimental, they seem to be sentimental in quite different senses of the word. Indeed, while the individual who takes his poodle to the parlour each month seems to be sentimental in a *pejorative* sense, the individual who treasures the single surviving photograph of his long-deceased parent seems to be sentimental in a *non-pejorative* sense. Put another way, while describing the former individual as being sentimental seems to be to criticise him, describing the latter individual as being sentimental seems not to be to criticise him. In fact, it seems not to pass any kind judgment on him.

To see why this might be so, consider first that no poodle – or any other kind of dog, for that matter – cares the least bit about its appearance. Thus, for some individual to take his poodle to the parlour each month because he cannot bear the idea of its having to walk around looking unkempt, is for that individual to act contrary to reason. Some individual's treasuring the sole-surviving photograph of his long-deceased parent on account of the comfort that it brings him, does not seem to be contrary to reason, however. Although his treasuring the photograph is not dictated by reason, it does not seem to be analogous to an individual's going through all of the stages of grief in response to the death of the heroin of a novel, for example.

With this in mind, it should be clear that although some person, idea or action's being motivated by, or grounded in, soft feelings, does render that person, idea or action

¹⁷ Jefferson, "What is Wrong With Sentimentality?" in *Mind*, Vol. 92(368), October 1983, p.523.

sentimental, it renders them sentimental only in a *non-pejorative* sense. For some person, idea or action to be sentimental in a *pejorative* sense, that person, idea or action must – in addition to its being motivated by, or grounded in, soft feelings – have made, or involve, some or other kind of error.¹⁸

Proponents of the sentimentalism objection, that is, those who claim that to think meaningful human-pet relationships possible is just to be sentimental, are obviously claiming that to think such relationships possible is to have made some or other kind of error. They must, therefore, be claiming that, in addition to its being motivated by, or grounded in, soft feelings, thinking meaningful human-pet relationships possible is mistaken because, as a matter of fact, human-pet relationships just cannot be meaningful.

Both the asymmetry objection and the anthropomorphism objection purport to show why meaningful human-pet relationships are not possible. Thus, both of these objections purport to show why thinking such relationships possible is mistaken. With this in mind, it should be clear that the sentimentalism objection in fact *reduces to* these other two objections. And this being the case, the sentimentalism objection *itself* warrants no further attention.

¹⁸ Feinberg, "Sentiment and Sentimentality in Practical Ethics" in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 56(1), September 1982, p.30; Midgley, "Brutality and Sentimentality" in *Philosophy*, Vol. 54(209), July 1979, p.385; Jefferson, 1983:521-522.

The Asymmetry Objection

Humans are intensely social beings. That is to say, they are strongly inclined to enter into, and maintain, (social) relationships with other humans. (So strong is this inclination, in fact, that some humans even go so far as to *create new humans* with whom they hope to bond.) And, what is perhaps most striking about inter-human relationships, is the extent to which they might, and very often do, differ from one another. Not only do relationships between lovers differ from those between siblings or friends, for example, but the relationship between any two lovers or siblings or friends, will always differ in some way from the relationships between other pairs of lovers or siblings or friends. This has much to do with the fact that humans *themselves* differ from one another. In particular, it has much to do with the considerable variation in human temperaments and capacities.

Pets are not unlike humans in this regard. That is to say, they, too, tend to vary – and often quite considerably – in their temperaments and capacities. Indeed, although (pet) animals have, in the past, been regarded as an undifferentiated mass, both *inter-* and *intra-*species variation in these respects have been well-documented. With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that *human-pet* relationships, like inter-human relationships, tend to differ considerably from one another. More specifically, it is hardly surprising that while some human-pet relationships might involve sleeping, recreating, travelling *and* working together, others might involve little more than sharing a piece of land, or a room, for example.

But, despite the myriad ways in which human-pet relationships might, and very often do, differ from one another, all such relationships have (at least) one standard feature, namely a lack of symmetry. I shall say much more about the notion of a relationship's lacking symmetry in due course. For now, it will suffice just to say that the inevitable lack of symmetry in human-pet relationships is largely explained by the fact that humans, as a group, and pets, as a group, have (very) different capacities.

Although some will think very little of the lack of symmetry in human-pet relationships, others will think that its implications for these relationships are quite profound. They might, for example, think that it rules out the possibility of any real connection between humans and pets. As such, they might think that even when humans and pets sleep, recreate, travel *and*

work together, their respective relationships with one another are merely superficial. But, if all human-pet relationships are necessarily superficial, then no such relationship can be meaningful in the *objective* sense. This is because, as we know from the previous chapter, to be meaningful in the objective sense, a relationship must have a certain depth to it. Thus, the (purported) inevitable lack of symmetry might be thought ultimately to preclude the possibility of meaningful human-pet relationships. This is the asymmetry objection.

While there is much that might be said about this objection, at this stage I wish to point out that whether human-pet relationships' being asymmetrical necessarily precludes the possibility of their being sufficiently deep and, thus, meaningful in the objective sense, depends on how 'asymmetrical' is understood in the context of relationships. Thus, if one hopes, as I do, to provide an accurate assessment of the objection, then one ought to begin by identifying the various ways in which (human-pet) relationships might be thought to be asymmetrical.

To this end, then, consider that although 'symmetry' was originally used to describe a relation of commensurability, where to be commensurable is to be measurable by the same standard,¹⁹ its primary use nowadays is to describe a more or less exact reflection of form on either side of a dividing line or plane. Indeed, although 'symmetry' can nowadays also be used to describe a mathematical function's invariance under permutations of its variables, or a physical object's invariance under arbitrary transformations of its coordinates, only a small minority of people, namely mathematicians and scientists, might use the term in these ways. As such, there can be little doubt that when we describe human-pet relationships as being asymmetrical, we are using 'symmetry', and thus 'asymmetry', in line with ordinary usage of these terms.

Of course, strictly-speaking, no human-pet – or any other kind of relationship, for that matter – can be divided into two more or less indistinguishable parts. Nonetheless, each and every human-pet relationship involves (at least) two *parties*, a human and a pet. And, with regard to each human and pet's relationship with one another, either or both might be described as having certain attitudes, emotions, or attributes. For example, either or both might be described as being committed to, trusting of, or affectionate towards the other. This being the

¹⁹ Brading & Castellani, "Symmetry and Symmetry Breaking" in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2008.

case, it is obviously possible to *compare* each human's commitment to, trust of, or affection towards his pet, with his pet's commitment to, trust of, or affection towards him. That is, it is obviously possible to determine that some human and pet are more or less *equally* committed to, trusting of, or affectionate towards one another. Likewise, it is possible to determine that either the relevant human or the relevant pet is the *more* committed, trusting, or affectionate party.

In light of this, one way in which 'symmetry' might be interpreted in the context of (human-pet) relationships, is as an (almost) exact correspondence between each and every one of the relevant parties' relational attitudes, emotions and attributes. On this interpretation, then, a symmetrical human-pet relationship would be one in which the relevant human and pet are more or less *equally* committed to, trusting of, *and* affectionate towards one another, for example. An *asymmetrical* human-pet relationship, on the other hand, would be one in which either the relevant human or the relevant pet is the *more* committed, trusting, *or* affectionate party (even if the other aspects of the relationship are equal).

Now, if 'symmetry' is interpreted in this way, then it would certainly be true that all human-pet relationships are asymmetrical. The reason for this is that while both humans and pets might accurately be described as having certain relational attitudes, emotions, and attributes, they are very unlikely ever to have *exactly the same* set of these attitudes, emotions, and attributes in their relationships with one another. But, even if some human and pet did happen to have exactly the same set of relational attitudes, emotions, and attributes, it is very unlikely that they would have them to the same extent. That is to say, it is very unlikely that they would be more or less equally committed to, trusting of, *and* affectionate towards one another, for example. This is largely explained by the fact that humans, as a group, and pets, as a group, have (very) different capacities.

It would, however, also be true that most, if not all, *inter-human* relationships are asymmetrical. Given the considerable variation in human temperaments and capacities, very few, if any, of us are likely (ever to be) party to relationships in which we are just as committed to, trusting of, *and* affectionate towards some other human, as he is committed to, trusting of, and affectionate towards us, for example. Even the most intense of friendships and romantic relationships usually fail to exhibit symmetry of this kind.

Thus, on this interpretation of ‘symmetry’, if, as the asymmetry objection implies, a relationship’s being asymmetrical necessarily precludes the possibility of its being meaningful, then very few, if any, of us, would be party to meaningful relationships. To be more precise, none of us would be party to a meaningful relationship with a pet, and very few, if any, of us would be party to a meaningful relationship with another human.

But, whatever we might think about the possibility of meaningful *human-pet* relationships, most of us, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, are deeply committed to idea that meaningful *inter-human* relationships are fairly common, or, at least, that they are not the rare exception to the rule. As such, on this interpretation of ‘symmetry’, accepting that relationships must be symmetrical to be meaningful entails giving up some of our most powerful intuitions about meaningful relationships. The urge to reject this version of the asymmetry objection will therefore be almost irresistible.

Even the most powerful of intuitions ought not always to trump other considerations, however. This is because there is no necessary connection between the strength of an intuition and the likelihood of its tracking, or being informed by the truth. Just consider the homophobe’s intuitions about homosexuals, for example: while these intuitions might be enormously powerful, there can be no doubt that they track, or are informed by prejudice rather than the truth. There is simply no good reason for thinking that homosexuals are depraved individuals, or that homosexual behaviour is debauched or otherwise regrettable.

However, there *is* good reason for thinking that meaningful inter-human relationships are fairly common, or, at least, that they are not the rare exception to the rule. To see this, recall from the previous chapter that the term ‘meaningful relationship’ refers to those relationships that feel satisfying, or are judged to have a certain depth to them. This implies that if some relationship is experienced as being satisfying, or is (accurately) judged to have sufficient depth to it, then that relationship is, as a matter of fact, a meaningful one.

Thus, in view of the fact that a great many inter-human relationships are experienced as being satisfying, or are judged to have sufficient depth to them, there is good reason for thinking that a great many inter-human relationships are, as a matter of fact, meaningful relationships. Accordingly, if ‘symmetry’ is interpreted in such a way that a relationship is symmetrical only if there is an (almost) exact correspondence between each and every one of its parties’

relational attitudes, emotions, and attributes, then there is very little reason to think that relationships must be symmetrical to be meaningful.

But, perhaps the asymmetry objection would carry more weight if the precondition for a relationship to be symmetrical, was not quite so demanding. Thus, rather than its being understood in terms of *each and every one* of the relevant parties' relational attitudes, emotions, and attributes, perhaps 'symmetry' ought to be understood in terms of the relevant parties' respective *sets* of these attitudes, emotions, and attributes. More specifically, perhaps 'symmetry' ought to be understood as the state in which the aggregation of the relational attitudes, emotions, and attributes of the one party, is equivalent to the aggregation of those of the other party. On this interpretation – what I shall call the *aggregative* interpretation – although X might be the more committed and trusting party, and Y, the more affectionate, so long as the affection differential is sufficient to offset the commitment- and trust differentials, the relationship between X and Y is a symmetrical one.

Alternatively, perhaps 'symmetry' ought to be understood in terms of *certain* of the relevant parties' relational attitudes, emotions, or attributes, such that a relationship is symmetrical just in case it exhibits (almost) exact correspondences between the relevant attitudes, emotions, or attributes of the relevant parties. If 'symmetry' is understood in this way, then a relationship can be symmetrical even if the relevant parties have vastly different sets of relational attitudes, emotions, and attributes, *and* if their respective sets fail to balance each other out. I shall refer to this latter interpretation as the *selective* interpretation of symmetry.

Although the selective interpretation is less demanding and, in some sense, less complicated than the aggregative interpretation, it obviously presupposes the existence of a set of *key* relational attitudes, emotions, or attributes. Thus, before I move on to evaluate these two alternative interpretations of 'symmetry,' I shall briefly consider three of the relational attitudes, emotions, or attributes that might be thought to be key to a relationship's being symmetrical. In particular, I shall consider the relevant parties' *cognitive* and *emotional capacities*, as well as their respective degrees of *power*, or *authority*, within the context of their relationship with one another.

To see why the first two of these might be thought relevant, imagine two beings with profoundly different cognitive capacities. Indeed, imagine, for example, that while one of the beings spends most of his time engaging in philosophical debate, the other has (virtually) no capacity for a grammatical language, and seldom, if ever, engages in any (complex) abstract thought. Since increasingly sophisticated cognitive capacities are required to support increasingly sophisticated emotional capacities,²⁰ a being's level of cognitive sophistication will usually be a fairly good indicator of its level of emotional sophistication.²¹ This being the case, it is reasonable to expect that while the former being will experience a rich array of emotions, the latter will have a *relatively* limited emotional repertoire or, at the very least, will not experience (the same) emotions in comparable depth.

In light of their vastly different cognitive *and* emotional capacities, it is also reasonable to expect that the two beings will experience the world in profoundly different ways. For example, although both might see a priest drop his cross down the drain, only the former might see the priest *as* a priest, understand the symbolic value of a cross, and thus, respond empathetically. The latter being is just not capable in the requisite ways. But, if all, or even most, of their respective experiences of the world are likely to differ from one another to such an extent, then although the two beings might be thought capable of connecting with one another, they might not be thought capable doing so *sufficiently deeply* for their connection to count as a meaningful one.²² As such, they might not be thought capable of connecting with one another sufficiently deeply for their relationship to count as a symmetrical one.

For very similar reasons, an (almost) exact correspondence between the relevant parties' respective degrees of power, or authority, in their relationship with one another, might be thought necessary for a relationship to count as symmetrical. To see this, consider a relationship in which one of the parties has much more authority than the other. More specifically, consider a relationship in which one of the parties is the main decision-maker: he decides, to a very large extent at least, when he and the other will interact, what the nature of their interactions will be, and how long their interactions will last. He might even decide

²⁰ For example, one cannot be empathetic if one does not have the capacity to recognise another as being separate from oneself, and to emulate that other's point of view, to some extent at least.

²¹ This will *usually* be the case as some beings – those with Asperger's syndrome, for example – might lack important emotional capacities *despite* their having remarkable cognitive capacities.

²² This idea was inspired by Weiss's "Do I Walk with My Dog?" in Steven Hale (Ed.), *What Philosophy Can Tell You about Your Dog*, 2008, pp. 199-214.

which topics can appropriately be discussed during their various interactions with one another. A relationship of this kind might well be thought too one-sided or coercive to have any real depth to it. Accordingly, a relationship of this kind might well be thought too one-sided or coercive to count as a meaningful – and, thus, as a symmetrical – one.

Having now considered the selective interpretation in some more detail, it should be clear that *both* the aggregative- *and* the selective interpretations of ‘symmetry’ are consistent with the idea that all human-pet relationships are asymmetrical. Although there is good scientific reason for thinking that the cognitive and emotional capacities of many animals have been sorely underestimated,²³ there is nonetheless a marked difference between the cognitive- and emotional capacities of most pets, and those of most humans. Or, to be more precise, the cognitive- and emotional capacities of most humans, tend to be (much) more sophisticated than those of most pets.

In fact, the cognitive capacities of most humans tend to be so much more sophisticated than those of most pets, that the humans involved in relationships with pets are almost always the main decision-making authorities when it comes to the terms of their relationships with one another. That is to say, pet custodians almost always decide on how close their relationships with their pets will be, on how much time they will spend in each other’s company each day, and on how much of this time will be spent playing together as opposed to working or sleeping together, for example.

According, it should be clear that human-pet relationships will very seldom, if ever, exhibit (almost) exact correspondences between those relational attitudes, emotions, or attributes that might be thought to be key to a relationship’s being symmetrical. What is more, given the vastness of the differences between the decision-making authority, and cognitive- and emotional capacities of most humans, and those of most pets, it is very unlikely ever to be the case that the aggregation of the relational attitudes, emotions and attributes of pet custodians, is equivalent to the aggregation of those of pets.

²³ See, for example, Mameli & Bortolotti, “Animal Rights, Animal Minds, and Human Mindreading” in *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Vol. 32, pp. 84-89; Pepperberg, *Alex and Me: How a Scientist and a Parrot Discovered a Hidden World of Animal Intelligence – and Formed a Deep Bond in the Process*, 2009; Rachels, “How Different are Humans from Other Animals?” in *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism*, 1990, pp. 129-172; and Wise, *Drawing the Line: Science and the Case for Animal Rights*, 2003.

But, if ‘symmetry’ is interpreted in either of these ways, then it is equally unlikely ever to be the case that the relationships between parents²⁴ and their young children – what I shall refer to as ‘parent-child relationships’ – exhibit the requisite sort of correspondences or aggregative equivalences. There can be no doubt that the cognitive- and emotional capacities of most adult humans tend to be (much) more sophisticated than those of most young humans. And, this being the case, it is not only in the nature of parent-child relationships to be imbalanced in a number of respects – including decision-making authority – but it is also in their nature that the respects in which they are imbalanced, do *not* cancel one another out. Thus, while some young children might be the more affectionate and communicative parties in their relationships with their parents, their greater affection and communicativeness would very unlikely be sufficient to offset the level of commitment, love and understanding that parents usually bring to these relationships.

It seems, then, that on both the aggregative- and the selective interpretations of ‘symmetry’, if as the asymmetry objection implies, a relationship must be symmetrical to be meaningful, then very few, if any, parent-child relationships would be meaningful. However, in the same way that most of us are sure that meaningful inter-human relationships are fairly common, most of us are sure that most parent-child relationships are meaningful. In fact, most of us are sure that parent-child relationships are *paradigmatic* examples of meaningful relationships. We know this because the vast majority of these relationships are experienced as being immensely satisfying, or are judged to have more than enough depth to them.

Given, then, that a relationship is meaningful just in case it is experienced as being satisfying, or (accurately) judged to have sufficient depth to it, there are good grounds for thinking that most parent-child relationships are, as a matter of fact, (very) meaningful. Consequently, even on these less demanding interpretations of ‘symmetry’, there seems to be very little reason to think that relationships must be symmetrical to be meaningful.

At this stage, however, proponents of the asymmetry objection might suggest that although parent-child relationships might initially seem to be analogous to human-pet relationships, there is in fact an important difference between these two kinds of relationships. In particular, they might suggest that although human-pet relationships will never be

²⁴ By ‘parents’, I mean to refer to those people who *actually* rear children; mere biological parents and those social parents who fail to discharge their duties towards their children, are not parents in the relevant sense.

symmetrical in either of the relevant ways, most parent-child relationships will gradually become (more or less) symmetrical in both ways. This is largely explained by the fact that most children, unlike pets, gradually develop (much) more sophisticated cognitive and emotional capacities. Indeed, while the fact that most children develop in these ways is important in and of itself, it also means that most children, unlike pets, are emerging autonomies. Thus, as most children continue to develop their capacity for self-determination, it is only natural that their relationships with their parents become less one-sided.

But, while it is true that most parent-child relationships, unlike human-pet relationships, will gradually become (more or less) symmetrical, appreciation of this fact is unlikely to render the asymmetry objection any less objectionable. One reason for this is that until such time as children's cognitive and emotional capacities have developed sufficiently, it would still be true that very few, if any, parent-child relationships are meaningful. Another is that there would still be some children – those with relatively serious forms of Down syndrome, for example – whose cognitive and emotional capacities will never be sufficiently sophisticated for their relationships with their parents to count as symmetrical. But, the relationships between parents and those children suffering from conditions such as Down syndrome are very often judged to have sufficient depth to count as meaningful relationships.

Thus, what I hope to have shown in this chapter is that however one chooses to interpret 'symmetry', there is very little reason to think that a relationship must be symmetrical to count as meaningful. In fact, there are very good reasons for thinking that symmetry is *not* a precondition for a relationship's being meaningful. Thus, even if it is true that no human-pet relationship is, or can be, meaningful in the objective sense, this cannot be explained by the fact that all such relationships are asymmetrical.

The Anthropomorphism Objection

In the first half of the seventeenth century, the French philosopher, René Descartes, famously declared that all animals are mere automata.²⁵ While there is now some debate about what he actually meant by this,²⁶ he was widely understood to be claiming that although many animals might behave as though they possess a variety of mental capacities, since no animal has a mind, no animal actually possesses any such capacities. This view – or, at least, one very similar to it – dominated (Western) thinking about animals for nearly two centuries before it began to fall from favour. Nowadays, the view is entirely out of favour: there is no longer any doubt that many animals have minds and, thus, that many animals possess a variety of mental capacities. For example, there is no longer any doubt that many animals are capable of experiencing pleasure, pain, anxiety, and fear.

However, doubts remain about just how far beyond the capacity to experience relatively simple emotions animals' mental capacities might extend. With these doubts in mind, consider that being party to a meaningful relationship is usually assumed, and very reasonably so, to require some level of mental sophistication. Consequently, to think that meaningful human-pet relationships are possible, and thus that pets can be party to meaningful relationships, might well be thought to be to engage in anthropomorphism.

Quite literally, to engage in anthropomorphism is to attribute to gods, animals, and objects, for example, characteristics which, of all currently existing beings and things, *only humans* possess. In the context of human-pet relationships, then, to engage in anthropomorphism is, quite literally, to attribute to pets characteristics which, of all currently existing beings and things, *only humans* possess.

But, given just how sophisticated certain species of animal are now known to be,²⁷ engaging in anthropomorphism might, in the context of human-pet relationships, be understood as attributing to pets characteristics that *they* do not possess, even though *other species of*

²⁵ See "Part 5" of *A Discourse on Method*, translated by Al Haines, 1 July 2008, available online at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/59/59-h/59-h.htm#part5> [Accessed on 09 December 2012].

²⁶ See, for example, Thomas' "Does Descartes Deny Consciousness to Animals?" in *Ratio (New Series)*, Vol. 19(3), September 2006, pp. 336-363.

²⁷ See, for example, Pepperberg, 2009; and Wise, 2003.

animal might, or do, possess them. For example, it might be understood as attributing to pets characteristics which, of all currently existing beings and things, only humans and the (other) great apes possess. While this does not, strictly-speaking, constitute anthropomorphism, it is certainly analogous to attributing to pets characteristics which, of all currently existing beings and things, only humans possess. Thus, for the purposes of this chapter, I shall understand anthropomorphism in this analogical way.

Now, although ‘anthropomorphism’ is usually *used* pejoratively, it is *not* an exclusively pejorative term. There are a number of contexts in which attributing to pets characteristics that they do not possess – even though other species of animal might well possess them – is not (usually) the least bit objectionable. In the context of myths, stories, and cartoons, for example, pets are very often portrayed as thinkers of human-like thoughts, and, thus, as speakers of a human-like, or grammatical, language. But, to think that the relevant writers and cartoonists have done something wrong in portraying pets in this kind of way, will usually be to make a mistake oneself. In particular, it will usually be to misunderstand the relevant myth, story, or cartoon, as well as the nature of myths, stories, and cartoons in general.

The obvious question, then, is what distinguishes these contexts from those in which engaging in anthropomorphism *is* liable to criticism? One method for arriving at an answer to this question requires that we begin by taking a closer look at anthropomorphism in the former sort of contexts, those in which it does *not* usually constitute an objectionable practice. Thus, I shall now take a closer look at anthropomorphism in the context of cartoons, and, more specifically, in the context of Jim Davis’ cartoon strip, *Garfield*.

The protagonist of this well-known cartoon strip is a lasagne-loving, ginger cat named Garfield, whom Mr Davis portrays as a mischievous and selfish creature who hates mornings, and Monday mornings in particular. Odie, the dim-witted dog with whom Garfield lives, bears the brunt of Garfield’s foul moods, and is also the unfortunate victim of most of Garfield’s mischievous plots and pranks. Although Odie rarely thinks or says anything, both he and Garfield are portrayed as having facility with a grammatical language.

In portraying Garfield and Odie in these ways, Mr Davis is trying to entertain his reader, as well as to comment on human nature and the human condition.²⁸ By implication, he is not trying to provide his reader with an accurate representation of the workings of real cat and dog minds. Neither is he trying to provide his reader with an accurate representation of the kinds of relationships that might exist between real cats and dogs. As such, there are no grounds on which to object to Mr Davis' anthropomorphic portrayals of Garfield and Odie. He has made no mistake in portraying them in the way that he has.

Most of the other cartoonists who anthropomorphise pets and other kinds of animals in their work are like Mr Davis in this respect. That is to say, they too are not trying to provide accurate representations of real animals. Something very similar can be said of most of those pet custodians who anthropomorphise pets. For example, when they ask Rex how he is feeling today, or describe him as 'giving them the cold shoulder' because they failed to keep their promise to him, most of them do not *actually* believe that Rex is capable of understanding or answering their question, or of 'giving them the cold shoulder' on account of a broken promise.

As such, it makes a great deal of sense to think that attributing to pets characteristics that they do not possess, even though other species of animal might well possess them, is *unobjectionable* so long as doing so does *not* constitute an attempt to understand or represent pets as they *really* are. Conversely, it makes a great deal of sense to think that such attributions *are* objectionable so long as they *do* constitute attempts to understand or represent pets as they *really* are.

My question about the possibility of meaningful human-pet relationships is a serious one. That is to say, my asking the question constitutes an attempt to understand something about the nature of the relationships between real humans and real pets. Accordingly, when I refer to those who think meaningful human-pet relationships possible, I am referring to those who genuinely think that pets can be party to meaningful relationships. Thus, if these people are in fact attributing to pets characteristics that they do not possess, then their doing so is necessarily objectionable.

²⁸ Shaw, "Garfield's Fun Fest: Jim Davis Interview" in *The Telegraph*, 3 April 2009, available online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/starsandstories/5099241/Garfields-Fun-Fest-Jim-Davis-interview.html>.

The question that remains to be answered, then, is whether those who think meaningful human-pet relationships possible are necessarily guilty of attributing to pets characteristics that they do not possess, even though other species of animal might well possess them. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall argue that that they are not. However, recall that the phrase “meaningful relationship” is ambiguous between “a relationship meaningful in the subjective sense”, and “a relationship meaningful in the objective sense”. Recall, furthermore, that instead of taking a position on which sense of meaningfulness really counts, I chose to argue that human-pet relationships can be meaningful in *both* senses. Thus, in the remainder of this chapter, I shall argue that *neither* those who think that human-pet relationships can be meaningful in the subjective sense, *nor* those who think that human-pet relationships can be meaningful in the objective sense, are necessarily guilty of anthropomorphism. I shall begin by arguing the former.

To think that human-pet relationships can be meaningful in the subjective sense is not necessarily to be guilty of anthropomorphism

Recall from Chapter 1 that for a relationship to be meaningful in the subjective sense, it must feel, or be experienced as being meaningful, where this is just to say that it must feel, or be experienced as being satisfying or important. But, what exactly is required for it to be true that some relationship feels, or is experienced as being satisfying or important? Is it necessary that *both* parties to the relationship experience it as being so? And, what does experiencing a relationship as being satisfying or important actually entail? Unless we are able to answer these questions, we shall be unable to determine which characteristics those who think meaningful human-pet relationships possible, are attributing to pets. As such, we shall be unable to determine whether, in attributing the relevant characteristics to pets, these people are guilty of anthropomorphism.

Consider, then, that if only one of the parties to some relationship experiences the relevant relationship as being satisfying or important, there is an important sense in which the relationship is one-sided. While this one-sidedness might be thought unimportant by some, others might think that it precludes the possibility of the relationship’s being meaningful. In particular, these others might think that despite the relationship’s being experienced as being meaningful by the one party, because it is not experienced as being so by the other party, it

cannot be thought to count as a meaningful relationship. There is no decisive argument in favour of either of these views. If my intuitions happened to be consistent with the former view, and yours, with the latter view, it is difficult to see how I might try to convince you to accept the former view instead. We would very likely simply have to agree to disagree in this case.

That said, it is worth noting that if one accepts the former view, then showing that thinking that human-pet relationships can be meaningful in the subjective sense does not constitute anthropomorphism, becomes that much easier. This is because if it is thought sufficient that just one of the parties experiences a relationship as being satisfying or important, then so long as the relevant humans experience their relationships with their respective pets as being satisfying or important, their relationships with their respective pets would in fact be meaningful in the subjective sense. Thus, on the former view, one need not attribute *any* characteristics to pets in order to think that human-pet relationships are, or can be, meaningful in the subjective sense.

By contrast, if one accepts the latter view, then thinking that human-pet relationships are (or can be) meaningful in the subjective sense does entail the attribution of *at least some* characteristics to pets. Thus, in what follows, I shall assume for the sake of argument that the latter view is correct. That is to say, I shall assume for the sake of argument that for a relationship to count as meaningful in the subjective sense, *both* parties to the relationship must experience it as being satisfying or important.

The important question, then, is what exactly does it take for a party to experience a relationship as being satisfying or important? In the same way that there are two senses in which a relationship might be thought to be meaningful, there are (at least) two senses in which a party might be thought to experience a relationship as being satisfying or important. According to the first of these – what I shall refer to as the *strong* sense – a party experiences a relationship as being satisfying or important just in case he thinks, or is disposed to think, that the relevant relationship is satisfying or important. Thus, according to the strong sense, a party is capable of experiencing a relationship as being satisfying or important, just in case he is capable of consciously entertaining the idea that some relationship to which he is party, is satisfying or important.

By contrast, according to what I shall call the *weak* sense, a party is capable of experiencing a relationship as being satisfying or important, so long as he is capable of experiencing a relatively sophisticated form of pleasure in response to his being party to the relevant relationship.²⁹ The reason that a *relatively sophisticated* pleasure response is required has much to do with the fact that to be capable of experiencing pleasure (and pain) – even if only a very rudimentary form of pleasure (and pain) – is just to be sentient. Thus, although sentience, like meaningfulness, is a matter of degree, *all* sentient beings are capable of experiencing pleasure (and pain).

But, to think that *all* sentient beings – even those only minimally so – are capable of experiencing a relationship as being satisfying or important, seems to strain credulity. Consider, for example, that very few, if any, of us would take the idea that crustaceans can be party to meaningful relationships, to be a plausible one. Consequently, it makes sense to think that although minimally sentient beings might gain a rudimentary form of pleasure from their being party to relationships, this form of pleasure response is insufficient to render them (potential) parties to *meaningful* relationships.

Of course, to require that both parties are capable of a sufficiently sophisticated pleasure response is extremely vague. Just how sophisticated must their pleasure responses be before they count as sufficiently sophisticated? There is no precise answer to this question. Indeed, in the same way that there is no precise point at which a gradually increasing number of grains of sand become a heap of sand, there is no precise point at which a pleasure response becomes sufficiently sophisticated. Rather, there is a grey area between those pleasure responses that are deemed sufficiently sophisticated, and those that are deemed *insufficiently* so.

However, since most human babies are routinely thought to be party to meaningful relationships with their parents, it must be true that most human babies are routinely thought to be capable of a sufficiently sophisticated pleasure response. This is important as most pets fall into roughly the same category as human babies when it comes to sentience, as well as those cognitive capacities that influence one's sentient capacities. Thus, if most human

²⁹ These two senses are inspired by Benatar's discussion of the different senses of the word 'interest' in "Abortion: The 'Pro-Death' View" in *Better Never To Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, 2006, p. 135.

babies are capable of a sufficiently sophisticated pleasure response, then so, too, are most pets.

But, while most pets might be capable of a sufficiently sophisticated pleasure response, very few, if any, pets are likely to be capable of experiencing a relationship as being satisfying or important in the *strong* sense. To see why, consider that to be capable of consciously entertaining the idea that some relationship (to which one is party) is satisfying or important, one must, at the very least, have some facility with both the concept of a relationship, and that of satisfaction or importance.

There is no longer any doubt that *some* pets, especially certain birds, might have at least some facility with some concepts. This is largely thanks to Dr Irene Pepperberg's work with Alex, an African Grey parrot. In the late 1970s, Dr Pepperberg began to teach Alex the vocal labels for several different objects, colours, and shapes.³⁰ Within just a few months of her beginning to teach him, Alex was using vocal labels to identify specific objects, colours, and shapes to a very high degree of accuracy. What is more, Alex actually understood that these labels were for *specific* objects, shapes, and colour. That is to say, he was not merely mimicking Dr Pepperberg.

We know this because besides his being proficient at identifying various objects correctly, Alex was also proficient at responding to certain kinds of questions about these objects. For example, if Alex was presented with a green key or a triangular piece of wood, he was able to respond to questions such as "what colour?" and "what shape?", to a very high level of accuracy. And, in order to answer these kinds of questions correctly, Alex would at the very least have had to understand that green and blue, for example, are colours, and that a triangle and a rectangle, for example, are shapes.³¹

Excited by his (very) basic understanding of the concepts of colour and shape, Dr Pepperberg went on to test Alex's capacity to understand some more sophisticated concepts, including those of sameness and difference. She did so by presenting Alex with various pairs of objects – a green triangular and a blue rectangular piece of wood, for example – and then asking him

³⁰ See Pepperberg's *Alex and Me: How a Scientist and a Parrot Discovered a Hidden World of Animal Intelligence – and Formed a Deep Bond in the Process*, 2009.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

“what’s same?” or “what’s different?”. Since Alex’s responses to her questions were almost always the correct ones, it is reasonable to conclude, as Dr Pepperberg did, that Alex also had at least some understanding of the concepts of sameness and difference.³²

But, while there is some reason for thinking that some pets, especially some birds,³³ might have some facility with some relatively sophisticated concepts, there is (currently) very little, if any, reason for thinking that some pets might have some facility with the concept of a relationship, or with that of satisfaction or importance. As such, there is (currently) very little, if any, reason for thinking that some pets might be capable of experiencing a relationship as being satisfying or important in the strong sense.

In light of all of this, it should be clear that whether it is necessarily anthropomorphism to think that human-pet relationships can be meaningful, depends on whether it is the strong or the weak sense that accounts for the *minimum requirement* for the capacity to experience a relationship as being satisfying or important. Thus, consider that although some party’s being capable of thinking something along the lines of, “this relationship is important”, might *add* to the meaningfulness of the relevant relationship, it might not be *necessary* for meaningfulness. In this case, since my question concerns the possibility of human-pet relationships’ being meaningful *at all*, the strong sense would not provide an account of the minimum requirement for the capacity to experience a relationship as being satisfying or important.

One very good reason for thinking that it is the *weak* interpretation that provides the relevant account, is provided by a *reductio ad absurdum*: if the strong interpretation provided the account, then, as I argued above, no being lacking facility with a grammatical language, or with either the concept of a relationship or that of satisfaction or importance, could experience a relationship as being satisfying or important. Thus, since a relationship can be meaningful only if both of the relevant parties are capable of experiencing it as being satisfying or important, no such being could be party to a meaningful relationship.

³² Pepperberg, *Alex and Me: How a Scientist and a Parrot Discovered a Hidden World of Animal Intelligence – and Formed a Deep Bond in the Process*, 2009, pp. 110-111.

³³ Some might object that Alex was a bird with truly exceptional abilities, and thus that his abilities should not lead us to be optimistic about those of other birds. But, since very little research has been conducted on birds, we simply cannot know whether or not Alex was a bird with truly exceptional capacities. It is for this reason that I claim only that there is *some* reason for thinking that some pets, especially some birds, *might* have *some* facility with some relatively sophisticated concepts.

But, no baby has any facility with either the concept of a relationship, or that of satisfaction or importance. And, while some young children might have at least some facility with the concept of a relationship, it is doubtful that any young child has any facility with the concept of satisfaction or importance. This is doubtful for (at least) two reasons. The first is that talk of, or questions about the importance of (their) relationships would very likely go right over their heads. The second is that there is widespread consensus amongst child psychologists that while most children begin to understand *some* concepts at about four years of age, the capacity for *relatively sophisticated* conceptual thought develops only much later.³⁴

The implication of this is that if the strong interpretation provided the account of the minimum requirement for the capacity to experience a relationship as being satisfying or important, then we would have to concede that no babies, and very few, if any, young children, can be party to meaningful relationships. Thus, if we are to retain the deep commitment that most people have to the idea that most parent-baby and parent-child relationships are meaningful, then we must accept that it is the *weak* interpretation that provides the relevant account.

If we accept this, then most pets would in fact be capable of experiencing a relationship as being satisfying or important and, thus, of being party to meaningful relationships with humans. Thus, if thinking meaningful human-pet relationships possible is sometimes to engage in anthropomorphism, then it must be because no pet can be party to a relationship that is sufficiently deep to count as meaningful in the *objective* sense. But, before I proceed to evaluate whether thinking that human-pet relationships can be meaning in the objective sense is necessarily to engage in anthropomorphism, two clarifications about the weak sense ought to be made.

The first is that although a being is capable of experiencing a relationship as being satisfying or important, only if it is capable of experiencing a relatively sophisticated pleasure in response to its being party to some relationship, it does *not* follow from this that a being experiences a relationship as being satisfying or important only when it *actually* has the relevant kind of pleasure response. To see why, consider that during sleep, one's

³⁴ Andrews, "Politics or metaphysics? On attributing psychological properties to animals" in *Biology and Philosophy*, Vol. 24(1), January 2009, p. 61.

consciousness is reduced to a level lower than that which is required to experience a relationship as being satisfying or important (in even the weak sense). Thus, if it *did* follow that a being experiences a relationship as being satisfying or important only when it actually has the requisite sort of pleasure response, we would have to concede that as soon as we fall asleep each night, our meaningful relationships suddenly cease to be meaningful.

But, while it is obviously daft to think that beings suddenly cease to be party to meaningful relationships when they fall asleep, one might well wonder whether beings that fall into states of deep unconsciousness continue to be party to meaningful relationships while in these states. For example, one might well wonder whether the meaningfulness of the relationship between a man and his wife, could survive the wife's becoming comatose. Although I have no strong intuitions either way, assuming that the relationship between the man and his wife was once meaningful, some might feel strongly that their relationship can remain meaningful in spite of the fact that the wife is now unable to experience anything at all. Is the weak sense able to accommodate this sort of thinking?

While the weak sense defines the capacity to be party to meaningful relationship in terms of the capacity to experience a relatively sophisticated form of *pleasure*, it will be useful here to begin by reflecting on some of David Boonin's comments about beliefs and desires. As Professor Boonin notes in *A Defence of Abortion*,³⁵ the chances are pretty good that ten minutes ago neither you nor I was consciously entertaining the belief that a triangle has three sides. The chances are equally good that ten minutes ago neither you nor I was consciously entertaining the desire to continue to exist. But, to conclude from this that neither of us *actually* possessed the relevant belief or desire ten minutes ago, would be utterly senseless.

This is because both you and I know that if we had been asked a question about the sides of a triangle ten minutes ago, we would have answered both quickly and correctly. Thus, it must be the case that although neither your, nor my belief that a triangle has three sides was *occurrent* ten minutes ago, we nonetheless possessed the belief, but in what Professor Boonin³⁶ refers to as the *dispositional* sense. In other words, it must be the case that while neither your, nor my belief that triangle has three sides was *occurrent* ten minutes ago, both

³⁵ 2003, pp. 65-66.

³⁶ 2003:65.

you and I were already disposed to answer questions about the sides of a triangle by bringing the relevant belief to mind.

For very similar reasons, although neither your, nor my desire to continue to exist was not occurrent ten minutes ago, both you and I can nonetheless be thought to have possessed the relevant desire. In fact, the desire to continue to exist might well have been one of our strongest desires ten minutes ago. Thus, there seem to be very good reasons for thinking that although a being might not *now* be experiencing (a relatively sophisticated form of) pleasure in response to his being party to some relationship, the relevant relationship might nonetheless be a meaningful one. This is because the relevant being might sometimes, or frequently, have the requisite form of pleasure response.

Thus, in the same way that meaningful relationships do not suddenly cease to be meaningful when the relevant parties go to sleep, the relationship between the man and his wife does not necessarily cease to be meaningful when the wife becomes comatose. Indeed, provided that her coma is only temporary, and that she has not suffered any severe brain injury, the wife can plausibly be thought to be disposed to experience a sufficiently sophisticated form of pleasure in response to her relationship with her husband.

This brings me to the second clarification: while a being that *could once* feel the requisite sort of pleasure in response to being party to some relationship, can *now* reasonably be thought to be party to a meaningful relationship, it does not follow that a being can, in advance of its being able to experience the requisite sort of pleasure, *now* be said to be party to a meaningful relationship. Thus, although the man's *comatose* wife can *now* reasonably be thought to be party to a meaningful relationship with her husband, it does not follow that a young foetus, for example, can *now* be said to be party to a meaningful relationship with its parents. This is because it is far easier to see how the meaningfulness of a relationship could *survive* one its parties being rendered comatose, for example, than it is to see how the meaningfulness of a relationship could exist *in advance of* one of its parties' being capable in the requisite way. The purported meaningfulness of the former relationship is at least based on something concrete. The purported meaningfulness of the latter relationship, on the other hand, is based on nothing more than the one party's hope that the other party will one day experience the requisite sort of pleasure in response to his being party to the relationship.

In the next section, I shall move on to argue that to think that human-pet relationships can be meaningful in the *objective* sense, is also not necessarily to be guilty of anthropomorphism. More specifically, I shall move on to consider what it might take for a relationship to count as meaningful in this sense, and then whether at least some pets can be party to relationships that meet the relevant condition(s).

To think that human-pet relationships can be meaningful in the objective sense is not necessarily to be guilty of anthropomorphism

Recall from Chapter 1 that since the phrase “meaningful relationship” is ambiguous between “a relationship meaningful in the subjective sense”, and “a relationship meaningful in the objective sense”, one might take any one of three views about the precondition(s) for a relationship to count as meaningful. In particular, one might take the view that: a) a subjective sense of meaningfulness is sufficient for a relationship to count as meaningful; b) an objective sense of meaningfulness is sufficient for a relationship to count as meaningful; or c) both a subjective and an objective sense of meaningfulness are necessary, and jointly sufficient, for a relationship to count as meaningful. This being the case, one might well wonder which view one *ought* to take.

However, since it is possible to determine whether human-pet relationships can be meaningful without first determining which view one ought to take, I have made no attempt to decide between the views. I have no intention of trying to decide between them now either. What I do intend to try to do now, however, is to better understand why some might prefer to take view b) or view c) over view a). This is because a better understanding of why some might think that a subjective sense of meaningfulness is either not necessary or not sufficient for a relationship to count as meaningful, very likely entails a better understanding of the objective sense of meaningfulness. And, the better one understands this sense of meaningfulness, the more convincingly one will be able to argue that it is not necessarily anthropomorphism to think that human-pet relationships can be meaningful in the objective sense.

Thus, let us begin by considering the case of two complete strangers whose eyes met for approximately thirty seconds on three consecutive mornings as they make their respective ways home on the train. Although these two strangers connected with one another only very

briefly on those three mornings, since they connected on three consecutive mornings, it is not unreasonable to think that, at least for those three mornings, they were party to some or other kind of relationship with one another. With this in mind, consider that if a subjective sense of meaningfulness was sufficient for a relationship to count as meaningful, then if both of the strangers experienced their connections as constituting a meaningful relationship, we would be committed to thinking that the strangers were party to some or other kind of *meaningful* relationship with one another.

But, regardless of how the two strangers might have experienced their connections with one another, it does not seem unreasonable to think that their relationship with one another simply could not have been a meaningful one. Indeed, given that they are *complete strangers* whose eyes met for about *thirty seconds* on *three* consecutive mornings, they cannot reasonably be thought to have been well-acquainted with one another. Consequently, it does not seem unreasonable to think that whatever else might have been true of their relationship with one another, it was simply too superficial to count as meaningful.

With this in mind, it does not seem unreasonable to infer that those who take view b) or view c), do so because they think that meaningfulness in relationships is (at least partly) contingent on the relevant relationships' having a certain objective depth to them. Accordingly, it does not seem unreasonable to think that a relationship's being meaningful in the objective sense is a matter of its having the requisite sort of depth to it. But, while knowing this much might suffice for some purposes, it does not suffice for my present purpose. This is because in order to show that it is not necessarily anthropomorphism to think that human-pet relationships can be meaningful in the objective sense, I must obviously be able to show that at least some pets are capable of being party to relationships that have the requisite sort of depth to them. To be able to show this, however, I shall need to have a much clearer sense of what it is that might give a relationship (objective) depth, as well as of how deep a relationship must be in order to count as sufficiently deep.

Thus, let us return to the relationship between the two strangers, and think more carefully about why it might reasonably be thought to have been too superficial to count as meaningful. To say that two individuals are complete strangers to one another is to say that neither of those individuals has any kind of knowledge or information about the other. Thus, to say that the two individuals in my example are complete strangers to one another is to say that *prior*

to their connecting with one another for the first time, neither of them had had any kind of knowledge or information about the other. *At the time* of their connecting with one another for the first time, and *by the time* they connected with one another for the third time, it is of course quite possible that they had some information about one another. However, since they never spoke to one another, the only knowledge or information that they could possibly have had about one another, is whatever knowledge or information they might have been able to glean from one another's physical appearance.

The physical appearance of another very seldom provides much insight into (the life and personality of) that other, however. That is to say, while the physical appearance of another might be able to tell us that he is relatively poor, worried, modest, and kind, for example, it will very seldom be able to tell us too much more than this. But, if this is the extent of the information that one might be able to glean from another's physical appearance, then it is surely true that one might be able to glean the *very same* information from the physical appearance of a great many individuals. After all, a great many individuals might accurately be described as being relatively poor, worried, modest, and kind, for example.

The implication of this is that if two individuals, A and B, cannot have more knowledge or information about one another than that which they might be able to glean from one another's physical appearance, then they cannot reasonably be thought to be interested in, or responsive to one another as *particular* individuals. Indeed, so long as individual A gleans from individual C's physical appearance, more or less the same information that he gleans from individual B's physical appearance, there need be no important difference between individual A's interest in, and responsiveness to individual C, and individual A's interest in, and responsiveness to individual B.

I shall return to this notion of being interested in and responsive to a particular other in due course. For now, the important point is that most of us are deeply committed to the idea that being party to a meaningful relationship necessarily involves being interested in, and responsive to a particular other.³⁷ Or, to put the point slightly differently, most of us are deeply committed to the idea that being party to a meaningful relationship necessarily involves a *particularised* interest in, and responsiveness to some other. As such, most of us

³⁷ Wright, "The Essence of Personal Relationships and Their Value for the Individual" in George Graham and Hugh LaFollette (Eds.), *Person to Person*, 1989, p. 18.

would agree that although individual A and individual B might be in a relationship with one another, it would strain credulity to think that they might be in a meaningful relationship with one another.

With this in mind, it seems that for a relationship to count as sufficiently deep and, thus, meaningful in the objective sense, both of the parties to the relevant relationship must be interested in, and responsive to one another as *particular* others. Consequently, it might seem that being capable of being party to an objectively meaningful relationship, is simply a matter of being capable of being interested in, and responsive to another as a particular other. But, while it might be the case that the precondition for being capable of being party to an objectively meaningful relationship is so simple, it would be a mistake to assume that it is so.

To see why, consider that it makes good sense to think that the more one knows about another, the more particularised one's interest in, and responsiveness to that other can be. Consequently, it also makes good sense to think that the more one is capable of knowing about another, the more particularised one's interest in, and responsiveness to that other can be. The implication of this is that although there might be a variety of beings that are capable of being interested in, and responsive to another as a particular other, these beings are likely to vary considerably in their capacities to be so. For example, while some of these beings might possess the relevant capacity in its most basic form, others might well be capable of a much more particularised interest in, and responsiveness to another.

For this reason, one might well wonder about the minimum requirement for the capacity to be party to an objectively meaningful relationship. To what extent must a being be capable of being interested in, and responsive to another as a particular other, for that being to be capable of being party to a meaningful relationship? A word of warning, however: to look for precision here is to look for precision where it cannot be found. This is because even if it were plausible to think that a non-arbitrary line could be drawn to separate the sufficiently from the insufficiently capable beings, reasonable people would very likely disagree about where exactly this line ought to be drawn.

A much better approach would be to identify the least sophisticated of those beings that are widely assumed to be capable of being party to an objectively meaningful relationship, and to consider the extent of its capacity to be interested in, and responsive to another as a particular

other. Thus, consider that most people are most confident about the meaningfulness of certain of their *inter-human* relationships. Consider, furthermore, that human babies are the least sophisticated humans with whom we can have a relationship. Thus, since human babies are widely thought to be party to meaningful relationships with their parents, it makes sense to think that they are the least sophisticated of those beings that we take to be capable of being party to an objectively meaningful relationship.

So, in what sense are human babies capable of being interested in, and responsive to others as particular others? By about 6-8 months of age, most babies are already strongly attached to their (primary) caregivers.³⁸ That is to say, by about 6-8 months of age, most babies already demonstrate a strong preference for the company of their caregivers over that of any other person. Babies of this age are visibly much more at ease when their caregivers are visibly proximate to them, and quickly become distressed when their caregivers go out of sight. Thus, although it might be possible for a younger baby to be party to an objectively meaningful relationship, there is good reason for thinking that by about 6-8 months of age, most babies are in fact capable of being party to objectively meaningful relationships with their parents.

Given, then, that the cognitive and emotional capacities of most pets are, at the very least, equivalent to the cognitive and emotional capacities of most 6-8 month-old human babies, there is good reason for thinking that most pets, too, are capable of responding to at least some others as particular others. Thus, for my present purpose, the important question is whether humans and pets are capable of responding to *one another* as particular others.

While some might assume that the answer to this question is a resounding “yes”, others might not be so sure. Indeed, although these others might agree that most humans and most pets are capable of responding to at least some others as particular others, they might not be so sure that it follows from this that most humans and pets are capable of responding to *one another* as particular others. I have my doubts about this view. Nonetheless, I shall take some time now to try to make sense of why some might adhere to it.

³⁸ Cole & Cole, “The End of Infancy” in *The Development of Children* (2nd Edition), 1993, p. 225; Kail & Cavanaugh, “Chapter 5” in *Human Development: A Life-Span View* (5th Edition), 2007, p. 174; Newman & Newman, “Infancy” in *Development Through Life: A Psychological Approach* (9th Edition), 2006, p. 148.

To this end, then, consider that while most human beings are overwhelmingly visually oriented, sight is very much a subordinate sense in most pets. More specifically, consider that while most humans rely primarily on their sense of sight when navigating the world around them, most pets rely on their sense of smell or hearing. This is largely explained by the fact that the sensory apparatus of most humans differs profoundly from the sensory apparatus of most pets. Take the sensory apparatus of most dogs, for example. While the eyesight of most dogs is estimated to be roughly equivalent to the eyesight of most humans, both the average dog nose and the average dog ear are estimated to be tens of thousands of times more sensitive than the average human nose and the average human ear. Thus, while it makes perfect sense that most humans rely primarily on their sense of sight when navigating the world around them, it would certainly be very odd if most dogs did too.

But, how might this be relevant to the question of whether most humans and pets are capable of responding to one another as particular others? To see how, consider that since 1) most pets perceive the external world primarily through their senses of smell and hearing, and 2) most pets' senses of smell and hearing are tens of thousands of times more sensitive than most humans' senses of smell and hearing, it makes sense to think that most pets have a very different experience of the world than most humans do. But, although we can know this much, we simply cannot know or even imagine what most pets' experience of the world is like.³⁹ We might be able to imagine what it would be like to lose our sense of sight and, thus, to have to rely on our other senses to navigate the world. But, we simply cannot imagine what would be like to experience the world as most dogs, for example, do.

This is because for it to be true that *we* are able to imagine what it would be like to experience the world as most dogs do, we would have to be able to do the requisite imagining *while at the same time* retaining our human perspective.⁴⁰ But, if we try to do the requisite imagining while at the same time retaining our human perspective, we cannot hope to learn any more about the way in which most dogs experience the world. The very most that we can hope to learn is what it would be like to experience the world as a human in a dog suit.

³⁹ Nagel, "What is it like to be a bat?" in *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83 (4), October 1974, p. 438; Weiss, "Do I Walk with my Dog?" in Steven D. Hales (Ed.), *What Philosophy Can Tell You About Your Dog*, 2008, p. 200.

⁴⁰ Nagel, 1974:439.

However, if we cannot imagine what it would be like to experience the world as most dogs do, then we certainly cannot imagine what it would be like to experience the world as some particular dog does. Thus, although we might sleep, eat, recreate, travel *and* work alongside our dogs, or more generally, our pets, there is certainly a sense in which our respective pets and their respective experiences of the world are just as alien to us as any pet and its experience of the world is alien to us. And, it is in light of this that some might think that although most pet custodians like to think that they are able to respond to their respective pets as particular others, they are in fact unable to do so.

There can be no doubt that we cannot understand the way in which our pets experience the world any better than we can understand the way in which any pet experiences the world. As such, there can be no doubt that there is a sense in which our pets and their respective experiences of the world are just as alien to us as any pet and its experience of the world is alien to us. However, it is just not clear why our pets' being alien to us in this sense should prevent us from being able to respond to them as particular others. Two beings can experience the world via different primary sensory modalities while still recognizing and responding to one another as particular others. Thus, although there is this way in which our pets are totally alien to us, there is also a way in which our pets are quite knowable to us.

To see this, recall that there is no longer any doubt that most (pet) animals are capable of experiencing pleasure, pain, thirst, hunger, anxiety, and excitement, for example. Given, then, that most human-pet relationships consist in relatively long-term, daily interactions between humans and their respective pets, it is reasonable to think that humans can come to possess some knowledge pertaining to their pets in particular. For example, humans might come to know that their pet prefers certain kinds of foods to others, that he becomes anxious when left alone for more than a certain amount of time, that he barks with excitement whenever he hears classical music, and that he enjoys being outdoors, even when it is raining.

Surely our being in possession of this kind of knowledge about our pets is sufficient to render us capable of being interested in, and responsive to them as particular others? Surely we do not, in addition to this, need to be able to conceive of what the world looks like to them? Since there is no obvious good reason for thinking that our possessing this kind of knowledge about our pets is *insufficient* to render us relevantly capable, there is good reason for thinking that humans and pets are in fact capable of being interested in, and responsive to one another

as particular others. As such, there is good reason for thinking that human-pet relationships can be meaningful in the objective sense, and thus that it is not necessarily anthropomorphism to think that they can be meaningful in this sense.

This, taken together with the fact that there is also good reason for thinking that it is not necessarily anthropomorphism to think that human-pet relationships can be meaningful in the *subjective* sense, means that those who think meaningful human-pet relationships possible are not necessarily guilty of engaging in anthropomorphism.

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The Permissibility of Having Pets

As I hope to have shown in the preceding chapters, there are good responses to both the asymmetry and the anthropomorphism objections to the idea that meaningful human-pet relationships are possible. Since these are the strongest and most pervasive objections, I therefore hope to have shown that there is good reason for thinking that at least some human-pet relationships are, or can be, meaningful. However, I do not pretend to have shown that there is good reason for thinking that at least some human-pet relationships are, or can be, among the *most* meaningful relationships in our lives. In saying this, I am in no way suggesting that human-pet relationships *cannot* be among the most meaningful relationships in our lives. Rather, I am simply pointing out the scope of the preceding argument and acknowledging that to say that human-pet relationships can be meaningful, is not necessarily to say that humans and pets can be friends, for example.

Whether humans and pets can be friends depends in part on one's conception of a meaningful relationship. That is, it depends in part on whether one takes the view that a) the subjective sense of meaningfulness is sufficient for a relationship to count as meaningful; b) the objective sense of meaningfulness is sufficient for a relationship to count as meaningful; or c) both the subjective and the objective senses of meaningfulness are necessary for a relationship to count as meaningful. But, it also depends on one's conception of friendship. As such, although this would be a very interesting question with which to engage, to do so would take me well beyond the scope of my dissertation.

But, there is another question with which I would now like to engage. This is the question of whether it is permissible for us to have pets. To this end, then, recall from Chapter 1 that for a relationship to be meaningful it must, in addition to its being experienced as being meaningful or having a certain objective depth to it, have a positive valency. Or, to be more precise, it must be an affirming relationship and not a destructive one. With this in mind, it makes sense to assume that there is a certain benefit associated with being party to a meaningful relationship. Accordingly, it makes sense to assume that pets derive some benefit from being party to meaningful relationships with their respective humans.

Contrary to what one might think, however, this is not sufficient to show that it is morally permissible for humans to have pets. Before this can be shown, we need to consider whether a) pets are *harmed* as a result of their being pets and, if so, whether these harms outweigh the benefits; and b) pets are *wronged* as a result of their being pets. Thus, in what follows, I shall consider these questions. However, I shall do so indirectly. That is to say, I shall do so by considering three objections to the practice of having pets – what I shall call the “restriction of freedom objection”, the “property objection”, and the “dependency objection”.

But, before I move on to consider these objections, two clarifications ought to be made. The first is that my discussion will be about the permissibility of having as pets, those animals traditionally referred to as pets. My discussion is *not* about the permissibility of having as pets, animals such as chimpanzees and tigers, for example. I ought also to clarify that I shall not spend any time discussing issues of obvious cruelty to, or neglect of pets. Rather, I shall discuss the permissibility of having pets assuming that those who do have pets are kind and caring towards them. However, in restricting my focus in this way, I certainly do not mean to imply that cruelty to, or neglect of pets is not an important issue. It is a *very* important issue. But, when asking about the moral permissibility of having pets, the more complex and interesting moral issues arise when those who do, or would, keep pets are assumed to be kind and caring.

The Restriction of Freedom Objection

In “Why Tamagatchis Are Not Pets,”⁴¹ Deborah Barnbaum argues that there are four conditions that are individually necessary, and jointly sufficient for something to count as one’s pet. In particular, she argues that for something to count as one’s pet, it must 1) be an object of one’s affection; 2) be kept near to or around one’s home; 3) lead a life that is dramatically different from one’s own; and 4) be dependent on one and have an interest in its continued existence. Although I have some reservations about Professor Barnbaum’s conception of a pet, I shall not elaborate on any of them here. Instead, I wish to draw your attention to one of the areas in which Professor Barnbaum’s conception is exactly right, namely that part of what it means for something to be one’s pet is that it is kept near to or around one’s home. Or, to put the point slightly differently, Professor Barnbaum is exactly

⁴¹ In *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children*, Vol. 13(4), 1998, pp. 41-43.

right to claim that if a creature continues to live freely in its natural habitat, it simply cannot be thought to be a pet.

With this in mind, consider that most animals, including most of the animals traditionally kept as pets, move around and do a variety of things. This is no mere accident of nature. Indeed, as David DeGrazia notes,⁴² animals that are *unable* to move around and do various things are considerably less likely to survive and reproduce than animals that are able to move around and do various things are. But, while most animals might have an interest in, and the capacity to move around and do things, only some animals – namely those that are sentient – can accurately be described as having a (rudimentary) *desire* to move around and do various things.⁴³

To see how this is relevant to the issue of the permissibility of having pets, consider that in addition to our knowing that sentient animals can accurately be described in this way, we also know that they typically experience pleasure or satisfaction when they are able to act in accordance with their desires, and distress or frustration when they are prevented from doing so. This implies that sentient creatures can reasonably be expected to experience pleasure or satisfaction when they are able to move around and do what they want, and distress or frustration when they are prevented from doing so. And this, taken together with the fact that being able to move around and do things enhances fitness, implies that, all things being equal, sentient creatures are benefited by having the freedom to move around and do whatever it is that they might desire to do.⁴⁴

Given, then, that (at least) the vast majority of pets are sentient creatures, it is reasonable to expect that they would benefit from having the relevant sort of freedom. However, since part of what it means for a creature to be a pet is that it is kept in or around one's home, part of what it means for a creature to be a pet is that it does *not* have the freedom to go wherever it might desire to go, or to do whatever it might desire to do. More specifically, part of what it means for a creature to be a pet is that its freedom to move around and do things is *restricted*. Thus, the vast majority of pets, by virtue of their being pets, are unable to access the benefit associated with having *unrestricted* freedom. In light of this, some might claim that the

⁴² See "The Ethics of Confining Animals: From Farms to Zoos to Human Homes" in Tom L. Beauchamp and R.G. Frey (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*, 2011, p. 738.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ DeGrazia, 2011:738.

practice of having pets is in fact impermissible. Those who make this claim are proponents of restriction of freedom objection.

There can be no doubt that the vast majority of pets have their freedom restricted. However, contrary to the restriction of freedom objection, it does not necessarily follow from this that the practice of having pets is impermissible. Indeed, the practice of having pets would be rendered impermissible *only if*, all things considered, pets are harmed as a result of their *not* having the relevant sort of freedom.

Thus, in order to determine whether the practice is rendered impermissible, let us take a closer look at some of the ways in which pet custodians tend to restrict their pets' freedom to move around and do things. While most pets tend to have ample opportunity to explore certain *parts* of their respective pet custodians' homes, many pets are not allowed the *run* of their respective pet custodians' homes. Many pets are not allowed the run of the neighbourhoods *surrounding* their respective pet-custodians' homes either. Moreover, while most pets tend to have some say in the matter of what and when they eat, very few pets are granted the freedom to eat whatever and whenever they might desire to eat.

This is certainly not an exhaustive list of the ways in which pet custodians tend to restrict their pets' freedom. In addition to the restrictions that I have already mentioned, there tend to be restrictions on pets' freedom to socialise with other pets in the neighbourhood, and to sleep wherever they might desire to sleep, for example. But, these, and many of the other additional restrictions on pets' freedom, are merely consequences of the restrictions that I have already mentioned. That is to say, there tend to be restrictions on pets' freedom to socialise with other pets in the neighbourhood, *because* there tend to be restrictions on pets' freedom to roam the neighbourhood. Similarly, there tend to be restrictions on pets' freedom to sleep wherever they might desire to sleep, *because* there tend to be restrictions on pets' freedom to roam their respective pet custodians' homes.

Thus, while the list that I have provided may not be exhaustive, it does include (some of) the most fundamental ways in which pet custodians tend to restrict their pets' freedom. And, what is striking about these ways is the close resemblance that they bear to some of the ways in which *parents* tend to restrict the freedom of their *children*. While parents might allow their non-infant children the run of their homes, they are very unlikely to allow their non-

infant children the run of the neighbourhoods surrounding their homes. Parents are also very unlikely to allow their children to eat whatever and whenever they might desire to eat.

Since the vast majority of children, like the vast majority of pets, are sentient, they too can reasonably be expected to experience some measure of distress or frustration in response to their freedom being restricted in these sorts of ways. Thus, children, like pets, are unable to access the benefit associated with having unrestricted freedom. What is more, since parents tend to restrict their children's freedom because children are not (yet) sufficiently cognitively sophisticated to be treated as autonomous agents, it is *because* they are children that their freedom is restricted. Interestingly, however, very few, if any, of us are moved to claim that having children is therefore impermissible. Indeed, while some of us do think that having children is impermissible,⁴⁵ very few, if any, of us think it is impermissible because children's freedom is restricted.

At this point, proponents of the restriction of freedom objection might argue that, contrary to what I have suggested, the restrictions placed on pets' freedom are simply not analogous to those placed on children's freedom. According to these proponents, the disanalogy stems from the fact that while life in a human home is natural for human infants and non-infant children, it is not so for pets. This is because life in a human home is life in the human world, a world very different from the animal world. Given the profound differences between the human and the animal worlds, it makes sense to think that *once* pets are living in the human world, it is in their interests that their freedom is restricted. Indeed, since things like cars and construction sites are unique to the human world, pets tend not to be able to grasp the dangers associated with them. Thus, if we fail to restrict pets' freedom to move around and do things, they will very likely come to some or other kind of harm. Accordingly, it makes sense to think that *once* pets are living in the human world, our restricting their freedom is permissible, if not required. However, the objection is that it does not follow that we are permitted to create the conditions under which the restriction of their freedom is necessitated. That is to say, it does not follow that we may bring animals into the human world and make them our pets.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, 2006.

There are a number of things to say in response to this objection. The first is that while there might be a sense in which life in a human home is not natural for pets like fish and birds, there is a strong sense in which life in a human home *is* natural for pets like dogs and cats. In other words, while pets like fish and birds might accurately be said to be taken out of the animal world and brought into the human world, the same cannot be said of pets like dogs and cats. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, dogs and cats have lived with humans for thousands of years. Over the course of these thousands of years, dogs and cats became *fully* domesticated.⁴⁶ That is to say, they adapted *at the genetic level* to being intimately associated with humans.

However, this is not to say that domestication is merely a matter of animals' adapting to a human environment. Rather, domestication is the result of two interwoven processes, the first being that of animal adaptation to human environments, and the second, that of selective breeding of animals by humans.⁴⁷ With regard to the latter process, this involves humans breeding animals with those traits that humans desire, and, thus, breeding out those traits that humans find undesirable. Thus, it is unsurprising that most present-day cats and dogs are much more docile and trusting than the wild animals from whom they descended.⁴⁸

In light of this, it makes sense to think that most present-day cats and dogs are too slow or clumsy to be successful predators, and too slow, clumsy, or trusting to be successful in evading (other) predators. As such, it makes sense to think that most cats and dogs are creatures that *need* to be intimately associated with humans in order to survive and really thrive. There is also plenty of evidence that suggests this, however. Indeed, according to the Humane Society of the United States, for example, more than half of all feral kittens die relatively soon after birth without human intervention.⁴⁹ Those that survive kittenhood have to face extreme weather conditions, infection and disease, attacks from other animals, as well

⁴⁶ Bok, "Keeping Pets" in Tom L. Beauchamp and R.G. Frey (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*, 2011, p. 777; Varner, "Pets, Companion Animals, and Domesticated Partners" in David Benatar (Ed.), *Ethics for Everyday*, 2002, p. 456.

⁴⁷ Clutton-Brock, "Origins of the Dog: Domestication and Early History" in James Serpell (Ed.), *The Domestic Dog: Its Evolution, Behaviour, and Interactions with People*, 1995, p. 15.

⁴⁸ Clutton-Brock, "Origins of the Dog: Domestication and Early History" in James Serpell (Ed.), *The Domestic Dog: Its Evolution, Behaviour, and Interactions with People*, 1995, p. 15.

⁴⁹ See pp. 1-2 of "An Overview for Caring for Free-Roaming Cats", available online at www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/pets/overview_caring_for_feral_cats.pdf [accessed on 25 October 2012].

as periods of starvation.⁵⁰ Without any human intervention it is, thus, unsurprising that the average lifespan of those feral cats that survive kittenhood is approximately two years.⁵¹ By contrast, the average life expectancy for cats that *are* cared for by humans is approximately 14 years.⁵²

Feral dogs tend to do even worse than feral cats. Indeed, while feral dogs and cats face many of the same challenges, the average life expectancy for feral dogs is only about one year.⁵³ While this might have something to do with the fact that dogs tend to be larger than cats, and that smaller animals tend to have a better chance of surviving when food is scarce, it might also be explained by the fact that the domestication process involved far fewer changes for the cat than it did for the dog. Whatever the explanation, since both cats and dogs do better when they are cared for by humans, it makes sense to think that life in a human home, and thus in the human world, *is* natural for these animals. This being the case, it makes sense to think that life among humans *is* natural for at least some pets.

Thus, as Hilary Bok points out,⁵⁴ while it might be true that our ancestors ought not to have domesticated animals all those thousands of years ago, that ship has long sailed. Present-day cats and dogs are members of fully domesticated species of animal. The implication of this is that it is simply not true that in making cats and dogs our pets, we are removing them from the animal world and forcing them to live in conditions under which the restriction of their freedom becomes necessary. Thus, contrary to the restriction of freedom objection, the fact that pets' freedom is restricted does not provide reason for thinking that the practice of having pets is morally impermissible. However, it does provide excellent reason for thinking that having *certain kinds* of animals as pets is morally impermissible. Since making animals such as turtles and monkeys our pets would involve our removing them from the animal world and forcing them to live in a world in which they are very unlikely to thrive, having these kinds of animals as pets is morally impermissible. The fact that pets have an interest in freedom also provides excellent reason for thinking that they ought to be given as much

⁵⁰ While it is true that the young of many wild animals also tend to fare very poorly, it is likely that domesticated animals would do even worse than these wild young do if they were left to fend for themselves or even if their parents reared them in the wild.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Mott, "U.S. Facing Feral Dog Crisis" in *National Geographic News*, August 21, 2003, available online at <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/pf/34706631.html> [accessed on 01 October 2012]; DeGrazia, 2011:743; Varner, 2002:456.

⁵⁴ 2011:777.

freedom as is compatible with the protection of their interests, while also taking into account reasonable interests of their human carers⁵⁵.

The Property Objection

As far as the law is concerned, pets are the personal property of the humans in whose homes they are kept. The implication of this is that, legally speaking, those humans who keep pets can accurately be described as the *owners* of those animals. While the legal status of pets as property is deeply engrained in human thinking, very little reflection is required to see just how inappropriate such thinking is. To say that something is one's property, is usually to say that one is entitled to exclusive physical possession, use, and disposal of that thing. In other words, it is usually to say that one is entitled to regard the relevant thing as a mere means to one's own ends.

But, most of us are – or, at least, claim to be – opposed to the idea that pets are mere means to our ends. Indeed, given that most pets are capable of experiencing pleasure and pain, and that most of us are not indifferent to the pleasures and pains of other creatures, we think that pets ought not to be treated in ways that cause them unnecessary pain or suffering. Interestingly, however, our opposition to the idea that pets are mere means to our ends has not led to their legal status as property being changed. Rather, it has led to the development and implementation of various animal welfare laws. Among other things, these laws prohibit the unnecessary killing, torturing, maiming, starving and under-feeding of pets, and require that pets receive adequate veterinary or other medical attention whenever necessary.⁵⁶

Thus, while pets remain the personal property of the humans in whose homes they are kept, both humans and legal systems distinguish pets from *inanimate* items of property in that they recognise that humans ought not to treat pets in certain ways. More specifically, they recognise that humans owe at least some duties *directly* to pets. But, while this situation might be good enough for many people, there are some who object to it. For example, Gary Francione acknowledges that existing legal systems offer *some* protection for pets' interests,

⁵⁵ Humans might, for example, have a legitimate interest in not having their pets eat from their plates or void their bladders or bowels in the house.

⁵⁶ See, for example, the *Animals Protection Act*, 1963 (Act No. 71 of 1962), available online at: http://www.aacl.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6&Itemid=9 [Accessed 07 October 2012].

but he insists that they are unable to offer *sufficient* protection for pets' interests.⁵⁷ And this, he thinks, is a direct result of the fact that, legally speaking, pets are property.

Of course, while existing legal systems might not be able to offer sufficient protection for pets' interests, they certainly do not *prohibit* pet owners from giving their pets' interests their due weight. Thus, while Professor Francione admits that the current legal status of pets does not preclude the *possibility* of their being well-treated by their human owners, he is nonetheless adamant that pets ought not to be conceived of as property and, thus, that their legal status must change.⁵⁸ What is more, he thinks that while humans ought to continue to care for those pets that *already* exist,⁵⁹ they ought *not* to breed pets or even allow them to breed with one another.⁶⁰ Henceforth, I shall refer to Professor Francione's view as the property objection.

Since our ceasing to breed pets, when coupled with our preventing them from breeding with one another, would eventually result in the extinction of pets, the prospect of our being morally obligated in these ways is unlikely to be well-received. It is especially unlikely to be well-received by those who enjoy having pets. These people will thus be relieved to know that the property objection is by no means uncontroversial. That is to say, they will be relieved to know that there have been numerous responses to the objection. Those who have responded differ in their views about where exactly the objection goes wrong. However, it is the diagnosis of those such as Hilary Bok and Cass Sunstein that poses the greatest threat to the property objection.

In a paper titled "Keeping Pets"⁶¹, Professor Bok readily concedes that the legal status of pets raises some serious moral questions. She also concedes that 1) if current legal systems are unable to offer sufficient protection for pets' interests, then we ought to amend those systems;

⁵⁷ See, for example, his *Animals, Property and the Law*, 2004; "Animal Rights: Your Child or Your Dog?" in *Introduction to Animal Rights: Your Child or Your Dog?*, 2007, pp. 151-166; and *Animals as Persons: Essays on the Abolition of Animal Exploitation*, 2008.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ To say that humans are morally obligated to continue to care for those pets that already exist is ambiguous between saying that 1) those who already have pets are obligated to continue caring for their pets; and that 2) those who do *not* already have pets are obligated to adopt and care for pets. While Gary Francione might be making both of these claims, it is by no means clear that he is.

⁶⁰ *Animals as Persons: Essays on the Abolition of Animal Exploitation*, 2008, p. 13; "'Pets': The inherent problems of Domestication", available online at <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/pets-the-inherent-problems-of-domestication/> [accessed on 21 October 2012].

⁶¹ In Tom L. Beauchamp and R.G. Frey (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*, 2011, p. 775.

and 2) if our owning pets somehow stood in the way of or hindered efforts to amend them, then we would have excellent reason to desist from breeding pets and, perhaps, from allowing them to breed with one another. However, she denies that our owning pets even hinders efforts to amend current legal systems or, more specifically, to change pets' legal status. Thus, according to Professor Bok, unless pets are harmed as a result of their current legal status, humans are not morally obligated to begin to phase out the existence of pets.

Cass Sunstein agrees with Hilary Bok in this regard.⁶² And, although neither of them offers a defence for the claim that our continuing to own pets does not alter the chance of their legal status as property being changed, there is very good reason for thinking it true. The reason is that our owning pets is not the root of the problem. Rather, it is people's *attitudes* towards pets that stands in the way of their (pets') legal status being changed. To see this, consider that the fact that pets currently have the legal status of property is largely a result of the attitude that most people have that pets *are* property. Or, to put the point in reverse, pets' current legal status as property is largely a result of the fact that only a minority of people think that pets cannot appropriately be thought to be the property of humans. This means that if pets' current legal status is to change, the majority of people's attitudes towards pets must change. However, there is very little, if any, chance that the minority's taking steps to phase out the existence of pets will change the attitude that the majority of people have towards pets. Accordingly, there is very little, if any, reason to think that the minority's *failing* to take these steps would stand in the way of pets' legal status being changed.

Both Professor Sunstein and Professor Bok's arguments, thus, turn on the question of whether pets are harmed as a result of their legal status as property. In addressing this question, both of them begin by emphasising that the problem with a legal system that conceives of pets as property, is that it *can* be understood to permit us to do things to pets that any plausible moral theory would say we ought not to do.⁶³ Indeed, although such a legal system might well include various animal welfare laws, being the property of another necessarily subordinates one's interests to those of one's owner, at least to some degree anyway. Thus, despite any protection accorded by animal welfare laws, we can expect that pets will be *insufficiently* protected if they are viewed as property.

⁶² See Professor Sunstein's "Slaughterhouse Jive" in *The New Republic*, Vol. 40, 29 January 2001, available online at http://tnr.com/print/article/books_and_arts/slaughterhouse_jive.

⁶³ *Ibid.*; Bok, 2011:776.

But, if this is the problem with such a system, then surely our giving appropriate respect to pets' interests, even where the law does not require that we do, would mean that they would suffer no harm as a result of their legal status as property? Both Professor Sunstein and Professor Bok think that it would. Accordingly, both of them conclude that if someone takes a pet into his home and allows the law to describe him as the owner of that pet, then so long as he does not allow the law's describing him in this way to influence his treatment of the pet, there is no reason for thinking that he ought not to take a pet into his home. Moreover, both of them conclude that the legal status of pets does not provide reason for thinking humans are morally obligated not to breed pets or even allow them to breed with one another.

Although Professors Sunstein and Bok might be right that pets do not suffer any harm as a result of their being owned by kind and caring humans, they seem to have failed to recognise that these pets might nonetheless be *wronged*. This oversight is surprising, and especially so given the widespread consensus nowadays that no human being is morally permitted to own another human being, irrespective of how well he might treat, or intend to treat that other human being. In fact, although there are still all too many parts of the world in which some human beings are exploited by, or even treated as the slaves of some other human beings, there is widespread consensus nowadays that every human being not only has a moral right but ought also to have a legal right not to be (treated as) the property of another human being.

This widespread consensus is grounded in the fact that "property" is simply not an appropriate category in which to place human beings. The reason for this is that to categorise something or someone as one's property, is to say that one is entitled to regard the relevant entity as a mere means to one's own ends. In other words, it is to say that the relevant entity does not have any morally considerable interests. But, (most) humans *do* have morally considerable interests. Thus, even if their interests are sufficiently protected, to place humans in the category of property is effectively to say that their interests are not *worthy* of protection or consideration. Since this is to impugn the status of morally considerable beings, it should be clear that to place humans in the category of property is necessarily to wrong them.

But, if the wrongness of categorising humans as property is explained by the fact that (most) humans have morally considerable interests, then categorising pets as property must also be wrong. Indeed, since (most) pets, like (most) humans, have morally considerable interests, if

categorising a human as property is to impugn the status of a morally considerable being, then so too is categorising a pet as property. This being the case, even if pets suffer no harm as a result of their being categorised as property, their being categorised as property can nonetheless plausibly be said to wrong them. This remains true irrespective of how well they might be treated by their respective humans.

However, all of this is not to say that pets are, as a matter of fact, wronged by being owned by humans. To see this, it is necessary to draw a few distinctions. In particular, it is necessarily to distinguish between a pet's a) being wronged by the law; and b) being wronged by the humans in whose homes they are kept. With regard to b), it is necessary to distinguish furthermore between a human's i) accepting or endorsing the law's categorisation of pets as property; and ii) rejecting the law's categorisation of pets as property.

Given that the law categorises pets as property, pets are clearly wronged by the law. But, it is my view that pets are wronged by the humans in whose homes they are kept *only if* those humans accept or endorse the law's categorisation of pets as property. This is because it is only if they accept or endorse the law's categorisation that they share the law's wrongful attitude towards pets. Those humans who reject the law's categorisation do not share that wrongful attitude. They therefore own their pets merely in the technical, legal sense, and, as such, do not wrong their pets by owning them.

But, let us suppose that I am wrong about this. That is to say, let us suppose that even when pets are owned merely in the technical, legal sense, they are wronged by the humans who own them. Would this have any implications for pets? It would not have any implications for those pets that *already* exist. This is because there is clear evidence that pets tend to live much longer and better lives when they are cared for by humans, as opposed to having to fend for themselves on the streets. Thus, there can be no doubt about it that to release our pets and, therefore, make them fend for themselves on the streets, would be to commit a greater wrong than to continue to care for those pets.

My being wrong would, however, have implications for *possible* pets, that is, those pets that *might* be brought into existence in the future. The reason for this is that if pets are wronged by being owned in the technical, legal sense, then we should either a) ensure that no more

pets are brought into existence; or b) ensure that pets no longer have the legal status of property.

Now, if we managed to change the legal status of pets and, thus, to ensure that they no longer had the legal status of property, then those humans who have pets would no longer be the “owners” of those pets. Rather, they would be the “keepers” or “custodians” of those pets. To be a pet-keeper or pet-custodian is much like being the (legal) guardian of a child, for example. In the same way that the guardian of a child is required to care for and safeguard the interests of that child, the keeper or custodian of a pet is charged with caring for and safeguarding the interests of his pet. The question, then, is whether our continuing to bring pets into existence would be morally permissible if we merely kept pets and did not own them. This question brings us to the third and final objection to the practice of having pets.

The Dependency Objection

According to Gary Francione,⁶⁴ even if the legal status of pets were changed so that they no longer fell into the category of property, humans would nonetheless have a moral obligation to ensure that no more pets are brought into existence. This is because, according to Professor Francione, there is something inherently wrong with keeping pets and not merely with owning them. But, what could be wrong with our keeping pets if we are good pet-custodians, that is, if we never fail to care for and safeguard the interests of those pets?

In Professor Francione’s view,⁶⁵ the inherent wrongfulness of keeping pets has much to do with the category of animal into which pets fall, namely “domesticated animals”.

Domesticated animals, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, are much more docile and trusting than the wild animals from whom they descended. But, while their being more docile and trusting renders them better suited to living with, or in close proximity to humans, it also renders them too slow or clumsy to be successful predators, and too slow, clumsy, or trusting to be successful in evading (other) predators. The consequence of this is that domesticated animals are almost entirely dependent on humans for their survival and well-being. Indeed, while most domesticated animals are dependent on humans for food and

⁶⁴ In ““Pets”: The Inherent Problems of Domestication” in *Animal Rights: The Abolitionist Approach*, 31 July 2012, available online at <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/pets-the-inherent-problems-of-domestication/> [accessed on 21 October 2012].

⁶⁵ Ibid.

water, some are even dependent on humans for affection and the opportunities to exercise and socialise (with other domesticated animals).

To be so dependent on another is to be in a position of extreme vulnerability. And, to find oneself in this kind of position is to run a very high risk of leading a short and miserable life. For this reason, Professor Francione deems it morally indefensible to place or allow another creature to be placed in such a position.⁶⁶ Given, then, that our continuing to bring or allow domesticated animals to be brought into existence is to place or allow these animals to be placed in such a position, he thinks that we ought not to continue to do these things.

But, if the practice of pet-keeping is to persist for more than a decade or so, we would obviously have to continue to bring into existence, or to allow to be brought into existence, at least some kinds of domesticated animals. Thus, Professor Francione also thinks that we ought to take steps to bring an end to the practice of pet-keeping. That is to say, he thinks that we ought no longer to breed pets or to allow them to breed with one another.⁶⁷

However strong or weak one might take the dependency objection to be, there are very good independent reasons for thinking that we ought not to continue to breed pets. One such reason is rooted in the fact that there are far too many pets that are brought into existence but never homed. These unwanted pets are then either killed or cast out onto the streets, where they are constantly at risk of starving, freezing, being run over, or preyed upon, among other things. For us to continue to breed pets would thus be to condemn an even larger number of these animals to short and miserable lives. Some of these additional unwanted animals would be those that are bred and then not homed. However, our continuing to breed animals would swell the numbers of unwanted pets even if *all* of the bred animals were homed. This is because the human desire and need for pets would then be partially satisfied by bred pets, leaving more of those pets that are not bred by us, unadopted.

The fact that there are far too many pets that are brought into existence but never homed also provides very good reason for thinking that, where possible, we should prevent pets from breeding with one another. Our allowing them to breed, like our continuing to breed them,

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ In ““Pets”: The Inherent Problems of Domestication” he says, “But if there were two dogs left in the universe and it were up to us as to whether they were allowed to breed so that we could continue to live with dogs...[I] would not hesitate for a second to bring the whole institution of [pet-keeping] to an end”.

would mean that an even larger number of pets are condemned to short and miserable lives. However, if the pet population eventually decreased such that the demand for pets exceeded the number of pets *already* in existence, then there would no longer be *this* reason for thinking that we ought always to prevent pets from breeding with one another.

Of course, we might in those circumstances still have an obligation to prevent *certain* pets from breeding with one another. Consider, for example, that since there is a high level of inbreeding within the various dog and cat breeds, diseases (and disorders) that can be inherited genetically are common in thoroughbred dogs and cats.⁶⁸ These diseases include epilepsy, cardiomyopathy, respiratory distress syndrome, hip dysplasia, and a variety of cancers. Since these diseases usually have a profoundly negative effect on the quality of life of those who suffer from them, it is not implausible to think that if we can reduce their incidence, then we ought to do so. This being the case, it is not implausible to think that even if the demand for pets were to exceed the number pets already in existence, we might nonetheless be obligated not to breed thoroughbreds and, perhaps, to prevent them from breeding with other thoroughbreds from the same breed.⁶⁹

However, it is much less clear that, in these circumstances, we would also be obligated to prevent *non*-thoroughbred pets or, at least, those non-thoroughbred pets that are unlikely to pass some relatively serious (genetic) disease or disorder onto their offspring, from breeding with one another. For one thing, the obligation to prevent pets from breeding with one another is a *positive* one. That is to say, it is an obligation that requires that we actually perform some action. Accordingly, we need a very good reason – and one that is much stronger than that which is required for thinking that we ought to *desist* from breeding pets, for example – for thinking that we ought to prevent pets from breeding with one another. But, is it just not clear that we would have a sufficiently strong reason for thinking that we ought to prevent the relevant kind of non-thoroughbred pets from breeding with one another.

⁶⁸ E.A. Ostrander, “Both Ends of the Leash – The Human Links to Good Dogs with Bad Genes” in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 367, 16 August 2012, pp. 637-638.

⁶⁹ When it is suggested that we ought to prevent the births of those *humans* who are likely to suffer from relatively serious (genetic) diseases or disorders, some people respond by raising the expressivist objection. According to this objection, to prevent the births of such humans is to express a discriminatory or negative attitude towards those people *currently* suffering from the relevant diseases or disorders. I shall not evaluate this objection here. Nor shall I consider its applicability to animals.

In this regard, it is also worth considering that to prevent pets from breeding with one another is arguably to deny them some good. In particular, it is arguably to deny them the pleasure that can be derived from sexual intercourse. At least some pets must derive some pleasure from sexual intercourse. It would otherwise be very difficult to explain why they engage in it. And, while sterilizing pets might seem to be a solution to this problem, some forms of sterilization remove pets' sex drive. Thus, although many sterilized pets do not have any sexual desires to gratify and, thus, do not feel sexually frustrated by the absence of sex, they also do not enjoy the pleasurable experience of sex. As such, while there is a sense in which these pets would not be missing out on anything, there is another sense in which they would be.

In the case of thoroughbred pets, our preventing them from breeding with other thoroughbreds from the same breed would not necessarily mean that they have to forgo sexual pleasure. Since we do not have an obligation to prevent thoroughbreds from breeding with conspecifics of different breeds, thoroughbred pets could still engage in sexual intercourse and, thus, experience sexual pleasure. But, even if our preventing them from breeding with other thoroughbreds from the same breed *would* mean that they had to forgo sexual pleasure, we might nonetheless be justified in doing so. This is because their having to forgo this kind of pleasure is outweighed by the harm that might result from their breeding with one another. In fact, since there is a very good chance that their breeding with one another will result in a significant harm, we might not merely be permitted to prevent them from breeding with one another, but also be required to do so.⁷⁰ The question, then, is not whether we should be preventing pets from breeding, but rather whether the dependency objection provides strong enough reason for thinking that we are in fact obligated in this way.

The first thing to say in response to this question is that dependency itself is not necessarily a bad thing. Both humans and animals depend on one another for a variety of things. For example, while many of us might rely on other humans to grow food for us or to look after us when we become ill, those other humans might rely on us to teach their children. This is not to say that we would not prefer to be (more) independent of one another. But, in general, we do not think that there is anything morally troubling about the fact that we depend on one another, or that animals depend on one another for a variety of things.

⁷⁰ While a discussion of the non-identity problem would be relevant here, such a discussion would take me beyond the scope of my dissertation and, thus, I shall not discuss it here.

But, as I have already mentioned, it is only in a very small minority of cases – such as that of a blind human and his guide dog – that humans and pets can really be said to rely on one another. In the overwhelming majority of cases, human-pet relationships are extremely asymmetrical. Or, to put the point slightly differently, it is true of the overwhelming majority of human-pet relationships that while the relevant humans depend on their pets for very little, the relevant pets are almost entirely dependent on their respective humans for the satisfaction of their fundamental needs and desires. Since this means that pets are to a very large extent at the mercy of their respective humans, this is a more troubling kind of dependency relationship.

Does the asymmetry of most human-pet relationships render them so troubling that humans are morally obligated to ensure that no more pets are brought into existence, however? Recall that in this chapter, I am concerned with kind and caring pet-keepers alone. Thus, although it is true that these pet-keepers' pets are at their mercy, they are precisely the kind of pet-keepers who can be relied upon to satisfy their pets' needs and desires. The implication of this is that if the dependency objection is to make any sense in these cases, then it cannot be because the relevant pets' needs and desires are not met. Instead, it would be because irrespective of whether pet-keepers can be relied upon to satisfy their pets' needs and desires, it is morally unconscionable that pets are so dependent on their respective keepers.

The idea that it would be wrong for us to continue to allow pets, beings almost entirely dependent on their respective humans for their survival and well-being, to come into existence might be thought a natural extension of another idea. In particular, it might be thought a natural extension of the idea that, setting the moral costs of interfering aside, it is wrong for us to allow parents to choose to have a child who will forever be dependent on them for his survival and well-being, instead of a child who will eventually cease to be dependent on them in this way.

But, while it makes perfect sense to think that, irrespective of how well these parents might treat their preferred child, it would be wrong for them to bring him into existence – and, thus,

for us to fail to prevent them from doing so⁷¹ – the same cannot be said in the case of pets. This is because in opting to bring their preferred child into existence, these parents are opting to bring into existence a human whose level of functioning is far lower than that of species typical functioning. These parents are thus opting to bring a severely impaired rather than an unimpaired human into existence.

Since our social structure is such that even those humans with mild impairments are usually rendered disabled, it is therefore wrong to opt to bring a severely impaired rather than an unimpaired human into existence. In the case of pets, however, to fail to ensure that no more pets are brought into existence is never to allow those pets to choose to bring a severely impaired rather than an unimpaired creature into existence. As such, the idea that it would be wrong for us to continue to allow pets to come into existence is *not* a natural extension of the idea that, setting the moral costs of interfering aside, it is wrong for us to fail to prevent parents from choosing to bring an impaired rather than an unimpaired child into existence. But, in light of this, it is just not clear why we ought to ensure that no more pets are brought into existence when pet-keepers can be relied upon to satisfy their pets' needs and desires.

With all of this in mind, it should now be clear that although we do have an obligation to desist from breeding pets and sometimes to prevent certain pets from breeding with one another, the dependency objection plays no role in explaining these obligations. The dependency objection is also unable to provide strong enough reasons for thinking that we are obligated to prevent all pets from breeding with one another. It follows from this, then, that the dependency objection fails to show that there is something inherently wrong with the institution of pet-keeping as distinct from the institution of pet-ownership. This being the case, even if we wrong pets by owning them in the technical, legal sense, we have no reason to aim at ending the practice of keeping them even though we would have reason to aim at ending the practice of owning them.

⁷¹ Again, it would be wrong for us to fail to prevent them from doing so only if the moral costs of interfering are set aside.

In the context of inter-human relationships, it is often the case that the more different two humans are, the more surprised we are to discover that they are friends or lovers, for example. That is to say, most of us would likely be surprised to discover that someone with no interest in academia, sport, or politics, had a deep friendship with someone whose life was driven by these things. At the very least, most of us would likely be *more* surprised to discover a deep friendship between these two individuals than we would be to discover a deep friendship between the latter individual and someone equally passionate about academia, sport or politics.

It makes sense, then, that most people tend to be surprised to discover seemingly meaningful relationships between members of two different species of animal. While there can be no doubt that humans differ, and often quite substantially, from one another, the differences between members of two different species will usually be both more profound and more numerous. But, while bonds between members of two different species of animal are rare in comparison to bonds between humans and (pet) animals,⁷² they do occur. One famous example of such a bond was that between an elephant named Tara and a stray dog named Bella.⁷³

But, while differences between humans or members of two different species of animal might sometimes render their bonding with one another unlikely, or even impossible, they might also sometimes *explain* the development and success of bonds. In the afterword of her book, *The Hidden Life of Dogs*, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas writes:

For any species, ours included, most of the rules of behaviour apply to our own kind. Our human radar senses human signals, just as a dog's radar senses dog signals. That is why dogs can watch us do wrong without finding fault, and why dogs can do what other dogs would consider wrong without our finding fault. As dogs might be said to come in under our radar, so we [might be said to] come in under theirs.⁷⁴

According to Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, then, although there is a sense in which humans and dogs bond with one another *in spite of* their differences, there is also a sense in which their bonding with one another is *facilitated by* their differences. Humans and dogs can be freely and fully themselves with one another.

This is both an interesting and an important idea. In a world in which so much is made of the differences between humans and animals, and in which a focus on differences often results in significant harm to animals, it is good to reflect on the fact that differences might sometimes be enabling rather than disabling.

⁷² The fact that they seem relatively rare might well have to do with the fact that there are simply far fewer opportunities for us to observe interactions between members of different species of animal, than there are for us to observe interactions between humans and pets.

⁷³ These two animals met one another in 2003 at the Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tennessee, and were almost inseparable until Bella died 2011. (Ileana Llorens, "Bella the Dog Dies; Tara the Elephant Mourns at Tennessee Sanctuary" in The Huffington Post, 4 November 2011, available online at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/04/bella-the-dog-dies-tarra-the-elephant-mourns_n_1074531.html.)

⁷⁴ 2010, 143-144.

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